

# JEEVADHARA

A JOURNAL OF CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION

## EXPERIENTIAL CHARACTER OF THEOLOGY

INDIAN THEOLOGIZING AND THE ROLE OF EXPERIENCE

*Vandana*

MYSTICAL THEOLOGY IN THE INDIAN TRADITION

*Bede Griffiths*

FOUR PATTERNS OF THEOLOGICAL EXPERIENCE

*John B. Chethimattam*

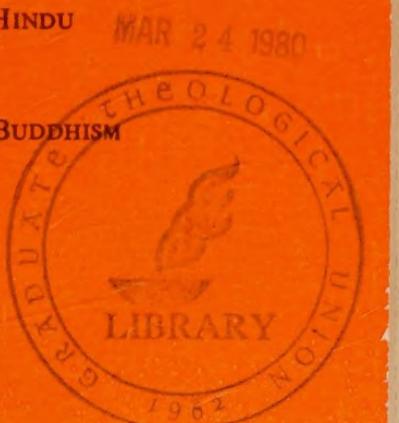
MYSTICISM - CHRISTIAN AND HINDU

*Vikrant*

THE EXPERIENTIAL CONTENT OF BUDDHISM

*Thomas Kochumuttam*

MAR 24 1980



*Jeevadharma* is published in two editions,  
English and Malayalam

GENERAL EDITOR

J. C. Manalel

SECTION EDITORS

- The Problem of Man: Theology Centre  
Kottayam - 686017
- The Word of God: K. Luke  
Calvary College  
Trichur-680 004
- The Living Christ: Samuel Rayan  
Vidya Jyoti, 23 Raj Nivas Marg  
Delhi-110 054
- The People of God: Xavier Koodapuzha  
St Thomas Seminary, Vadavathoor  
Kottayam-686 010
- The Meeting of Religions: John B. Chethimattam  
Dharmaram College  
Bangalore-560 029
- The Fullness of Life: Felix Podimattam  
St Joseph Theological College  
Kottagiri-643 217

LITERARY EDITOR

Sebastian Poonoly

SECTIONAL BOARD OF EDITORS

Raimundo Panikkar  
Ignatius Puthiadam Thomas Kochumuttam

EDITOR - BOOK REVIEWS

J. B. Chethimattam

(Contd on inside back-cover)

to the revered memory of

## **JAYAPRAKASH NARAYAN**

whose word and work,  
moral worth and integrity and call to  
'total revolution'  
were always a beacon light to all,  
who led this nation to its  
secnd liberation  
and loved its 600 million people  
without counting the cost,  
this issue of jeevadhara is dedicated.



JEEVADHARA

# The Meeting of Religions

## EXPERIENTIAL CHARACTER OF THEOLOGY

Editor:

John B. Chethimattam

Theology Centre  
Kottayam - 686 017  
Kerala, India

## CONTENTS

	Page
Editorial	234
<i>Indian Theologizing and the Role of Experience</i>	237
<i>Vandana</i>	
<i>Mystical Theology in the Indian Tradition</i>	262
<i>Bede Griffiths</i>	
<i>Four Patterns of Theologieal Experience</i>	277
<i>John B. Chethimattam</i>	
<i>Mysticism - Christian and Hindu</i>	289
<i>Vikrant</i>	
<i>The Experiential Content of Buddhism</i>	311
<i>Thomas Kochumuttam</i>	

## Editorial

Christian Theology is the ongoing communitarian reflection on faith-experience. That experience is the source and substance without which it will be empty speculation. Newness in theology comes from the novelty of the situations and contexts in which faith is being experienced. This is true also of the changes that are taking place in theology today. So we are devoting this issue of *Jeevadhara* to a discussion of theology from the experiential structure of religions especially in the Indian context. Vandana in her article on Theology and Experience examines this experiential character of theology and Bede Griffiths focusses attention on the fundamental importance of mystical experience for theologizing in tune with the ageold religious tradition of India.

But experience as related to theology is not uniform, amorphous or disorganized. There are varieties of religious experience in theology according to the different philosophical principles supposed and implied, and the logics of procedure adopted. The confusion in theology today comes from the failure to distinguish the different types of experience from which theologians express their theologies. The eagerness to keep up with the Joneses can be sometimes self-defeating in theology as in social life. When a theologian in his ambitious synthesis pretends to include in the same breath what Rahner, Congar, Teilhard de Chardin, Schillebeeckx, Hans Küng, Gutierrez and Panikkar are saying, there can be only confusion. Though all of them may have the same Christian faith, equal sincerity and plenty of good intentions, they do not speak the same language; nor do they have the same philosophical background or the same logical method of procedure. The same type of confusion is created when people try to import the Liberation Theology of Latin America born of the Marxist dualistic sociology, into India where our village communities, constituting more than 80% of the population, have a totally different social thought in which

the priest, the merchant, the carpenter, the farmer and the menial servant all receive their talents, gifts and lots from the same Ultimate Being according to each one's karma and make themselves what they are by what each one contributes to others. Hence it is absolutely necessary to distinguish the main patterns of theological experience. In my article are discussed four patterns, by no means exhaustive, of experience, two from the West and two from the East. Vikrant compares the theological experience of Sankara and Ps. Dionysius, and Thomas Kochumuttam briefly examines the Buddhist method of experience. I hope this will promote theologizing in India on a solid experiential basis.

Fordham University  
Bronx, N. Y. 10458  
U. S. A.

John B. Chethimattam

# Indian Theologizing and the Role of Experience\*

"We speak only what we know and witness only what we have seen" (John 3:11).

To have a relevant theology for this day and age, and even more for this country, the theologian must be primarily an "experiencer" and therefore a "meditator". What we need in the Church today, especially in the Church in India, is a theology which mediates on the mysteries of Christ, no longer as concepts, as the Greeks did, but in the realities of daily life, beginning directly with one's own experience of Christ and that of the Self which is at the centre of every Indian theological and spiritual tradition.<sup>1</sup> "The Indian Church will never start theologizing unless and until she becomes a genuinely local Church",<sup>2</sup> and she will never begin until the students of theology are initiated into becoming "experiencers" and "meditators" in the Indian tradition.

## I. Theology and theologizing in India today

Before speaking of experience and its role in theologizing, let us briefly recall the origin and development of "theology", and what it may mean for India today. The word "theology" is not found in the Bible. Plato used it to mean a rationale of the gods for demythologizing the Greek poets (Rep. 379 A). Aristotle used it for the part of philosophy that explains the cosmos in terms of an unmoved mover. The term was repugnant to early

\* A paper presented at the Seminar on "Theologizing in India", sponsored by the CBCI Commission for Seminaries and held in Pune, India, from the 26th to the 30th of October, 1978. Here some omissions have been made and Sanskrit words dia-criticized (General Editor).

1. Abhishiktananda: *Saccidananda* (ISPCK, 1974), p. xv.
2. Amalorpavadas: *Approach, Meaning - Horizon of Evangelisation* (NBCLC, Bangalore, 1973, p. 17).

Christians because it was applied also to the civic cult of Greek and Roman gods. As *gnosis* had acquired more dangerous connotations, Origen turned to *theologia* to express the Christian understanding of God as distinguished from Christian faith.<sup>3</sup>

Theology may be defined as *gnosis*, the only authentic kind commended by Paul and acclimatised in the nascent Christian world by the Alexandrian fathers. This *gnosis* is understood differently by the Christian East and West - according as the "movement" which governs their whole attitude to Christian faith and life, is different.<sup>4</sup> We shall see later how the "movement" of the Eastern Church suits Indian theology and spirituality far better. In the struggle against Arianism the "explanation of God" (theology) came to be used for Christian knowledge of the Trinity<sup>5</sup> as distinct from Divine Economy. Pseudo-Dionysius used "theologia" for mysticism (the Western Fathers hardly used it); it is in this sense, it seems to me, that we in India should understand theology, and not for a methodical, dialectical investigation of Christian truths. For what the Indian tradition has to teach us is the place of mysticism in theology. "While the Greek genius was for logical, rational understanding, and the Roman genius was for law and organisation, the Indian genius is for mystical experience. Theology in India will have to be above all, a mystical theology."<sup>6</sup>

Many a theology student today is heard to complain that his studies are wholly irrelevant; many would prefer "involvement" in the "realities" of the country. If they mean by this that there should be no academic preparation, it is, of course, untenable; for "we cannot escape theology. . An existential approach to it does not excuse us from hard intellectual work.

3. New Catholic Encyclopedia: *History of Theology*. Vol. XIV (McGraw Hill Book Co., N. Y. London).

4. Georges Dajalifve: "East and West. Two Theologies, One Faith" in *Rediscovering Eastern Christendom. Essays in memory of Dom Bede Winslow*. Ed. by E. L. T. Fry and A. H. Armstrong. (Darton, Longman and Todd, London).

5. Athanasius: *Oratio I Contra Arianos* 18.

6. Dom Bede Griffiths: "The Mystical Dimension in Theology" *Indian Theological Studies*, Sept. 1977. Vol. XIV No. 3.

But before a theologian can start a scientific reflection, he must listen to the Word of God (And theology remains essentially *diakonia* - a ministry of the Divine Word, of *Brahmaṇaspati* - Lord of the Holy Word"). Theology is genuine human thought, not a mere searching of texts, - not only the *Biblia*, the Holy Writing-but all Christian writings (and for us in India, also all non-Biblical, "non-Christian" writings). "These are our inheritance, but they used to be made our own, to be laid hold of personally - experientially - and indeed to be tested against our own experience and then articulated again in fresh language and appropriate symbols"<sup>7</sup> that are relevant to the local Church.

Theological thinking - a *Yatra*. Then perhaps we would find that theological thinking becomes for us a pilgrimage to the Father, the Final Goal, the *Paramanand*, and that one learns and worships as one travels; learns from one's experience on the pilgrimage in the measure in which one reflects, meditates and worships. For a theologian is essentially one who prays. According to tradition, theology is a praise of God; the theologian is one who speaks to God.<sup>8</sup> Evagrin's statement seems to me true: "If you are a theologian, you will pray truly; and if you pray truly, you are a theologian."<sup>9</sup> *Orando quam disputando*<sup>10</sup> - a seeking through prayer rather than through disputation. It is perhaps outdated today, but it seems to me most apt for fruitful theologizing, especially in India.

This meditation, worship, contemplation would not mean that the theologian would have his head so much in the clouds that his feet are not firmly planted on the earth. On the contrary: *in the measure that he is rooted in the One Reality, with his "roots upwards"* - *Urdhva moola* (S. Gita XV. I), to that

7. Pet Frensen: *Three Ways of Dogmatic Theology* - Intelligent Theology Vol. I. (Darton, Longman & Todd, London 1967), p. 1. From Preface by John M. Todd.

8. Héan do Fecamp: un maître de la vie spirituelle au xi<sup>e</sup> siècle-quoted by Dom Jean Leclercq: *La Théologie Monastique in L'Amour des Lettres et le Desir de Dieu* (Ed. du Cerf Paris 1957).

9. De Oratione 60. Cf. I Hausherr: "Le Traité de l'Oraison d'Evagre le Pontique" in *Rev. d'Asct, et Myst.* 1934. p. 90.

10. St. Bernard: *De Consid.* V. 32.

measure he would be rooted in the realities of this World. The more he feels the touch of God- *Brahmasparś*, - (and "experience" means precisely this direct contact without intermediary on the level of knowledge: 'I touch what I touch') - the more truly he would be in touch with all the realities included in the One Reality- "*Ekam evam advaitam*" Only so and not otherwise will our theology become truly relevant for India because it will be based on *atmasakṣatkār* and *anubhav* (to be dealt with later), relying on the *śastras* but also being a *sadhana* i.e. a theology that is Biblical, with a spirituality of the heart, which is feminine, contemplative, mystic, pneumatic and "āśramic".

## II. Theologizing with Indian realities and experience

Till today we have looked mostly to Western Theologians for the source of our inspiration and the solution of our problems. More and more Indian theologians, however, are dissatisfied with this approach- "borrowed" and "cerebral". They are seeking ways and means of "unlearning" as it were; hiding behind "the cloud of forgetting"- also in the sense of "The Cloud of Unknowing". They begin now to turn inwards and seek within the realities of our own land. And what do they find? They find the Double Reality of India today and the tensions which go with it, viz. (1) India's concern for Social Justice and Conscientization and (2) her desire to become authentically her own Indian self- through Inculturation. Often at national and even international meetings, the tension between these two trends or currents becomes acutely pronounced. Actually, the two need not be at loggerheads; we can change dialectical tensions into creative polarities. The experience of being totally at loggerheads on the deepest things of life, with people to whom we are bound in faith and love, may be as creative as it is painful. In reflecting on and resolving these two "realities", problems or polarities in the Indian Church-since the function of theology is to discover, interpret and express reality,<sup>11</sup> the theologian of today's India will not find the solution in Latin American Liberation Theology any more than in a Theology of Hope, European-based, with Christ as "The Coming One", as different from "The Christ of Here and Now" of the American-based Radical Theology. Nor will he find it in the Traditional Theology with faith's depend-

11. Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 3, 10, 22, 40, 62.

ence on the past, nor in the Theology of Juxtaposition playing off tensions among these—<sup>12</sup> however relevant or useful these various theologies may be for Western realities and problems. The Indian theologian must theologize from his own experience, of his own realities and above all from his own experience of the Reality. The former would include “the signs of our times”, “the voices of our age” and country; “the events, needs and desires of the people of God”,<sup>13</sup> as he experiences them in India today.

It is heartening to note that Indian theologians are seeking today to do precisely this, and realise that “we cannot build a theology meaningful, and nourishing for the Indian Church on foundations of Western Theology”. Thus, for instance, it is significant to see placed among “the principal issue in an Indian Theology”:- Revelation and Scripture as Reification of *Anubhava*; Suffering humanity as the *locus* of theological reflection; *Anubhava* as Revelation; mystical experience as the source and goal of theology; Faith experience; Hope and Human interiority; the Word of Silence....”<sup>14</sup> Thus “reality” becomes a theological source-*locus theologicus*- for its reflection, interpretation and formulation<sup>15</sup>, in our particular tradition, milieu and experience; and even if one of our theologies becomes a “theology of Liberation” it will be Indian - integrating the essence of Indian liberation- *Mokṣa*, - and the burning desire for it- *mumukṣutva*. It cannot be a carbon copy of Latin American theology, for our experience of this reality is different.

Ours cannot be a purely secularistic humanistic approach to life, with an uncritical acceptance of the Western theology of Secularisation I wonder if this precisely is the reason why I often feel ill-at-ease along with other students of theology: our theological texts come from and speak almost exclusively of, the Western Christian or Post-Christian situation. Very excep-

12. Gustave Gutierrez: “Theology - A Critical Reflection” in *A Theology for Liberation* (Orbis Books, Maryknoll NY 1973).

13. *Gaudium et Spes*, 4, 44. 11.

14. J. B. Chethimattam, CMI., In a Letter of July 7, 1978 as Section Editor for the Encounter of Religions, *Jeevadhara*.

15. Amalorpavadas: *Ibid.* pp. 18-19.

tionally one meets a refreshingly relevant approach like that of Kosuko Koyama's "Waterbuffalo Theology". For us in India the secular is still largely sacred: *Sarva bye tad Brahma; ayam atma Brahma*. For India the question of God is an existential one. The great merit of Indian religious tradition is that it places the problem of God and religion not up there and out there, but at the centre of the human consciousness of pleasure and pain, of desire and misery. The science of God is not a detached ontology of the Absolute Being, but the description of the meaning and necessity for man of (experiencing) such a Being'.<sup>16</sup> Here God is not 'dead' but very much alive. What Ratzinger says about the theologian being suitably compared to the clown (cf. Kierkegaard and Harvey Cox's "Secular City")-how he is not taken seriously in his medieval, old-fashioned costume, ticketed and classified, because his performance has nothing to do with reality--not, or need not be true of the Indian theologian.

Neither can the influence of Marxist thought, focusing on praxis and geared to the transformation of this world, and the action of man in history, be the primary motivation of Indian theologizing. The historical, the action-oriented, the logical, the dogmatic, the efficient is not part of our charism, though this is not to deny the place of service in love to our brother. While orthodoxy and orthopraxis too have, or should have their role in our theologizing, our theology should be primarily *atmasakṣatkār*-self-realisation. "The Self of God becomes our very own dear self."

### III Fear of an experiential approach

Some fear this experiential approach because of the confusion between the road of experiences which is empirical and the Road of Experience.<sup>17</sup> The two are not the same the

16. J. B. Chethimattam: *Unique and Universal* (Dharmaram College, Bangalore) Introduction: cf. also M. Lederle & A. Sequeira on the problem of atheism in India in *Examiner* of Sept. 2nd, 1978 p. 563.

17. Ernest E. Larkin: "The Search for Experience" *The Way* April '71.

empirical is the observable, tangible, measureable aspect of human life—prayers, not prayer; feeling sorry rather than being sorry, etc. To confuse the two can be disastrous. Empirical experience, like an immediate touching and sensing of transcendental realities, is an overflow, a bonus and, if genuine, an integral and rewarding part of a religious experience. This latter consists of insight and personal commitment, and is a depth reality. This experience may be present without any observable sign other than peace in His presence, even though arid in feelings. Empirical experiences are ambiguous and always need to be discerned and evaluated. They may be projection of one's fantasy. "The instant mysticism of a drug culture is a bogus experience of God. So also is transcendental meditation when there is no personal *metanoia*."<sup>18</sup> Our Lord wisely warned us: "By their fruits you shall know them." The hallmark of a genuine contemplative experience is always found in the life and relationship of a person.<sup>19</sup>

Today many confuse too a human encounter in a sensitivity session with the encounter with God, though God can and may be experienced at such times as an "afflux of being" (Marcel). The ultimate test of empirical experience is the effect on the person or community in terms of faith, hope and charity. True, Christ calls in manifold ways—human experience, through people, His Word in the Bible or through events, through sacraments, etc. For the way He operates in our life is thoroughly incarnational.

There is fear too that the search for experience may underplay the role of philosophy, theology, heritage of tradition. But the individual's experience is not an isolated function unrelated to the community.<sup>20</sup>

#### **IV. Social dimension of religious experience**

Religious experience is individual and communal, though in Indian spirituality the latter is hardly emphasised. Jean Mouroux in his classic *The Christian Experience* says: "Religious

---

18. Ibid.

19. id. : ibid.

20. id. : ibid.

experience necessarily includes a social element because in God's eyes man is always a member of one great family of "Our Father"; because a person can only seek and find God on condition that he helps others to seek and find Him too; because the more he penetrates into the mystery of his God, the more he realises that there is a mysterious appeal addressed to others, to all others, just as necessarily and personally as to himself, because his own freedom can only be consecrated to the search for His kingdom and the establishment of His rule among men"<sup>21</sup>. This one's own experience is always to be collated with that of the community. With due allowance for the prophet it is normally the community that measures the individual and not vice-versa. Experience means that through inter-relationships and love we grow into full manhood in Jesus Christ. Here is the challenge of an experiential age - an effort to live on a personal level.

#### V. What then is the "hard core" of religious experience?

One must always be aware that psychologists, sociologists, philosophers, and theologians will always use terms like "experience", "consciousness" etc. with different shades of meaning. Jean Mouroux calls it "a dynamogenic feeling" - the consciousness of a power that gives life by giving a new savour to existence, a feeling of incomparable security in the soul, a power of which the will knows nothing. We enter this world as the result of "a vivid sense of the reality of things unseen".<sup>22</sup> Thus Experience is the act through which the person becomes aware of himself in relation to the world, to himself or to God.<sup>23</sup>

Experience is any immediate contact with Reality. It does not allow for self reflection. Raymundo Panikkar has something

21. Jean Mouroux: *The Christian Experience* (Sheed & Ward p. 6.

22. Jean Mouroux: *Idem* p. 5.

23. Raimundo Panikkar: *The Ways of East and West in New Dimensions of Religious Experience*, George Devive (Alba House, Div. of the Society of St. Paul, Staten Island New York 10314.)

interesting to say in "The Ways of East and West".<sup>24</sup> There are three stages, dimensions or levels of Consciousness — the sensual where we act; the intellectual where we understand; and the mystical where we are. The empirical — the first — is the proven reality which has passed through our senses. The experiment — the second — is the same reality, submitted to our testing and trying capacities. The third — experience — is the same reality which has already "passed through". The first is pure objectivity; the second blends with subjectivity; the third abolishes all objectivity. There are psychologists who would not agree that experience is possible without awareness; and awareness is always subjective. One who asks for an 'experience' says he does not care how others judge, see or sense things. In experience the subject and object are not distinct; they are totally united: plunged into one another, as we shall see when speaking of the *advaitic anubhav*. Experience is ultimate because it means immediate contact with the real, and thus there is no possibility of going beyond it without destroying the experience. You cannot explain it. It cannot have its criterion of validity outside itself.

The Supreme Experience is identification with Reality itself; synonymous with pure consciousness. I no longer see the 'thing'. I 'create' it with the divine 'I' in which my person is mingled. As the medieval Tamil Bhakta Sadaśiva would say: "In every 'I' I attempt to utter, his "I" is already glowing." The Supreme Person transforms the person totally. He will do the ordinary things but he will not be distracted, because there is "no incompatibility of domains".

(I have quoted from Panikkarji here among Western theologians, not because I do not glory in having him among "our" theologians but because of what he has to say on this point — with a Western mind but an Indian heart, as it were).

Bela Krigler gives us further insights for our own theologizing in "The Experience of Self as the Beginning of Systematic Theology".<sup>25</sup> The Supreme Experience is meeting God as

24. *Id. Ibid.*

25. Bela Krigler: The Experience of Self as the Beginning of System. Theol. in *New Dimensions in Relig. Experience*. George Devive (Alba House, Staten Island, NY 10314).

"Letting-Be". The Self-hood becomes Christhood on the cross by the affirmation of death as the absolute form of Letting-Be. The Father is the ultimate energy or act of Letting-Be (Rahner's "Unoriginate Origin of being and life, communicated yet undiminished" - equivalent to the *Sat* of India?). The Son is the Expressive Being or the Logos expressing Being in beings (Rahner's "God's historical expressibility; India's *Cit* - Self-awareness of *Sat* - expressed in the avatars?). The Spirit is the Unitive Being - uniting beings to Being (Rahner's "Yearning and welcoming love", - which, India would say is Supreme Bliss - *Param Anand* issuing from *Sat* and *Cit*?).

## VI. The Hindu experience of God

Why our theology in India should be experience-based becomes clear if we look at the source from which Hinduism draws her life-giving waters - what Lacombe calls *L'élan spiritual de l'hindouisme in civilisation indienne est centrée sur le fait de l'expérience mystique naturelle et sur la réflexion autour de ce fait*<sup>26</sup> Recent popular Western departures in theology, it is felt by Christians in touch with living Hinduism, will not affect Christianity as much as Hinduism encountered in depth - living and praying together in mutual respect with sincere Hindus, will make us conscious of the relativity and insufficiency of all formulations and symbols.<sup>27</sup> A book like Klostermeir's *Hindu and Christian in Brindavan* may do more for Indian theologizing based on experience than many academic volumes discussing abstract notions now pre-occupying Western minds.

Right through the ages, from Vedic times, through the inwardness of the Upaniṣadic sages and later the God-centred Bhakti religions, at the root of the bewildering growth of Hinduism, lies *Anubhav*<sup>28</sup> or *Anubhūti*.

26. Lacombe quoted by Amalorpavadass : "Destinée de l'Eglise dans l'Inde d'auj 'oured' hui" (ISPC Ecole de la Foi - Fayard - Mame) in ch. xv. Une Rencontre de l'Hindouisme au niveau de l'Experience de Dieu p. 218.

27. Cf. J. M. Manickam: "Anubhava as Pramaṇa of an Indian Christology" *Jeevadhara* (I, 1971) p. 228 where he speaks of theology of religious dialogue and *anubhav - sambhavana* transcending mere conceptual formulations.

28. Ignatius Puthiadam: "Experience of God in Hinduism" *Jeevadhara* (IV, 1974) p. 247.

For *Anubhav* as *pramāṇa*, in the Indian religious tradition one can see three important phases<sup>29</sup>:

- (1) *Prakṛty anubhav* when nature and her *śakti* was the *pramaṇa*. The initial experience of wonder (*sambhramanubhav*) giving birth to the experience of reverence (*sadaranubhut*) of the *Mysterium Tremendum*. To communicate this experience to later generations, myths and symbols were developed, perhaps to us crude, but intelligible to the people of that time.
- (2) *Srutyanubhav* – hearing and remembering the *prakṛtyanubhav* of the fathers, which because of their tone of authority and the ancient's wisdom, appeared authentic, later, reinforced by ancestral worship. *Sruti* became infallible and inviolable. The functions of *Srutyanubhav* were to make the bearer wise (pedagogical role) and God-fearing (liturgical role). Therefore the *Vedas* and later the *Upaniṣads* interpreted the *Vedic Anubhav*. Finally,
- (3) *Bhaktyanubhav* to *Iśwar* (the Lord) developed leading to the highest union of *bhakti* in *sayujya* (oneness) finding oneself in the Bliss of God, through a personal faith commitment which surrendered totally (*prapatti*) to His custody through the *Guru*, one who had already attained *darsan* of God could now take others across the *samsarsagar*, to the Further Shore: becoming the *pramaṇa* for all practical purposes. He shares and imparts this *anubhav* which becomes the *paramprasad*. At whatever stage and in whatever manner God is experienced it is always in terms of direct contact that the realisation – *Anubhuti* – of the highest Truth can be dreamt of or desired or striven for.

(a) *Advait Sankara* in his *Aparokṣanubhuti* shows how the direct cognition of the *Atman* which is always present in all thought is the final stage, when the knower and the known merge in the Self Effulgent *Atman* which alone ever IS, and besides which nothing else exists. This realisation of the nondual is the consummation of *aparokṣanubhuti*. The central theme of this work is thus the identity of *Jeevatman* and *Paramatman* – realised through the removal of ignorance that hides the truth – by the

---

29. Manickam: ibid. p. 228ff.

Light of *Vicār*. For this certain disciplines are laid down. It is of interest that one of the fifteen steps to the attainment of this True Knowledge is "a solitary place" - *Vijan Des*. That solitude known as Space is itself *Brahman* - "for it alone is solitary, since it admits of no second at any time".

The Indian theologian would do well to get to "know" this Upaniṣadic experience of the Absolute; the quest of the Absolute is in the interiority of man. It is the way of progressive interiorisation - a conscious effort to pass beyond concepts, words, categories of ordinary thought.<sup>30</sup> The sages sought the root of thought, of breaths of speech, sight, hearing - that which is their origin and sets them in motion (*Kena* 1. 7) - the unseen Seer, the unheard Hearer, the unthought Thinker, the ununderstood Understander (*Bṛhad.* III. 8. II). They hoped to experience this Brahman by which people hoped to attain everything (*Bṛhad.* 1. 4. 9). To know It is to attain all desires. It frees men from all fear (*Tait. Up.* II. 1. 4. 5).

To know, to realise, to experience reality means to become Reality. To know Brahman is to become Brahman. This is *Anubhav* or integrated experience in which He is known as one's self. That Brahman is oneself is known only from Scripture (SB I 1.4). According to Sankara scriptural knowledge is necessary for *Anubhav* - *Sastra yonitvat* - Scripture is the womb of theology. Theologizing is a *Vihara* - "a walking round" the field of Scripture.<sup>31</sup> And as soon as the individual self knows that he is in fact Brahman, he is liberated. "While the fruits of action are realised at some later time, the fruit of knowledge is immediate experience. Just as a prince kidnapped in his childhood does not know that he is a prince but realises himself to be Brahman as soon as he hearkens to the *Mahavakya*".<sup>32</sup> So this *anubhav* is liberation. And the proof of *anubhav* is one's own heart (SB. IV. 1. 15 - *Sva hrdaya pratyayam brahma vedanam*). The *mukta*

30. Ignatius Puthiadam: *ibid.*

31. Brihad Shasya Vartika in Saccidananda Murty: "*Revelation and Reason in Advaita Vedanta*" (Motilal Banarasidas) ch. 8: *Anubhav*.

32. Gispert-Sauch: *Shankara and Our Theological Task*. *ibid.* p. 7.

alone can judge whether he has become a *mukta* or not. He may continue to live on, to all outward appearances, the same, but he is not. Sankara says the yogins see the Self devoid of all phenomena at the time of their *samradhana* (the practice of fixing the mind in meditation on the Self with devotion). Then there is no difference between the seer and the seen. Then Brahman is known and all duality is destroyed. *Anubhav* is the measured conviction, the clear undoubted awareness that one is Brahman - which is generated by *Vedanta Vakyas* (SB. I 1.4).

(b) In the *Bhakti* tradition of the Bhagavad Gita and Madhava and others the essential experience and interpretation of reality is also that the Supreme Being is not known through the senses but only from *Sruti* - but the only way to reach that saving knowledge is through loving devotion. Even when the theistic movement - *Bhakti* Tradition - challenges the core experience of the Upaniṣadic tradition, it did not succeed in escaping its influence. Though Tukaram said he preferred to "taste sugar" than "be sugar", he is also heard to say "God and his worshippers are not distinct. Thou art my form, I, beyond doubt, am Thy form". "If we search deeply, God, we shall find that we are different in name only." Thus very often in *Sakta* the experience of God passes beyond dialogue into silence, beyond distinction into complete merging. Manikkavasager says: "Sakti in Siva, Siva in Sakti." They in me, I in them, so that we may all be one with Them.<sup>33</sup>

Amalorpavadass talking of meeting Hinduism at the level of experience<sup>34</sup> and of these two currents - (*advaita* as *enatase gnostique* and *Bhakti* as *extase d'amour*) - says though the latter seems nearer the Christian concept, and therefore one would wish to encounter Hinduism in this 'current' *et que l'Inde abandonna ainsi les profondeurs de Soi dans les profondeurs de Dieu*", yet because the mysticism of the Self is the "fond" of Hinduism, this spirituality of immanence is a better approach to Hinduism.

De Smet in his paper "Shankara Vedanta and Christian Theology" gives a survey of the attitudes adopted by modern

33. Quoted by Ignatius Puthiadam. ibidem.

34. Amalorpavadass: idem, p. 313.

Christian scholars towards Vedanta. It is a scholarly, academic approach. Abhisiktananda on the other hand in his book *Saccidananda* has opened up for us new possibilities for a Christian approach to *Advait* from the experiential meditative view-point. Though only a very few have this *Advaitic* experience and find it had to remain on the *Advaitic* plane even in their testimonies, this intuition should be seriously taken up as a challenge by the Indian theologian - beginning always with his own prayer-life-experience.

## VII Indian theologizing from "Within"

It seems to me that in the Indian experience of the Self, this aspect of the Bliss-Spirit unification or Union "from within": - the innermost Lawardness in God, the deepest Depth in Him, - is all-important and significant. The Indian theologian has first humbly to "enter" into this relationship of God's "Innermostness", if one may put it thus. If Pannenberg like other modern theologians thinks we can no longer do theology "from above"; that we must come at it "from below",<sup>35</sup> then India must come to it "from within" the *Atman*, the Spirit of *Sat-Cit-Anand*.

This surely means primarily a personal experience of the Spirit "in the cave of the heart". It is not a question of getting to 'know' the Being with the mind! - this is in any case impossible - but to let Being be; to let things be that are; to allow things to be. Actually this is very much in line with oriental spiritual and psychological temperament (cf. "Iu Tai of Taoism), though no doubt it can be some thing aggravatingly inexplicable to the efficient, problem solving Western mind - i. e. if "letting be" is taken to mean "allowing evil to remain unchallenged and unchanged". Christ Himself challenged whenever there was distortion of truth or goodness (e. g. John 2, in the temple which they changed into a "den of thieves"). But whenever He found truth, He let it be (e. g. Jn 4, with the Samaritan woman - "You speak truly..."). With us in India and in our Church it is startlingly different, e. g. how much venom is poured out on efforts at inculuration, yet how an evil such as the caste system remains unchallenged even by our spiritual leaders. It is

---

35. Allan D. Galloway: *Wolfhart Pannenberg* (G. Allen Unwin, London 1973), p. 13.

from within these realities and from whithin the Inmost Reality that Indian theology should begin.

### VIII. Indian theologian's *sadhana*

“Letting-be” enables too thoughtless meditation to have a theological foundation. This is perhaps where the Indian theologian's *Sadhana* should begin and even end. Without *Sadhana* his theologizing would be baseless, foundationless, ‘like a house built on sand’ – because he would continue to remain merely in the realms of thought, not experience. Sankaracarya requires of his candidates for *Brahmavidya* not the equivalent of an S. S. C. or B. A., – as we do, of our theologians – but rather *Svadhyaya* – self-study or study by oneself of the Scriptures especially, again not a cerebral kind of study, but one of *śravan* and *mānan* leading to *nididhyasan* (as we have mentioned above). He also required of them the well known *Catuṣṭa Sadhana* of *Vedantasara*: viz. 1) the ability to discern between the permanent and non permanent (*Vivek*); 2) utter detachment from all personal enjoyment (*vairagya*); (3) *śamadisaṅka*:- a tranquil mind (*śama*), self-control (*dama*), renunciation (*uparati*), endurance or patience (*titikṣa*), concentration (*samadhi*), faith or trust (*śraddha* in the guru and his teaching method, and in the Scriptures. Finally, for real *Brahmajijnasa*, the candidate had to have (4) a heart burning with desire for *Mokṣa* (*Mumukṣutva*).

Only such a serious preparation by *sadhana* would enable him to “see”. He must long to see – like the blind man of Lk 18:42 or like Arjun (*Draṣṭum icchami Te roopam Aiśwaram*–B. Gita 36. II), see the Divine Form of Him who is Nameless and Formless, beyond all *nam* and *roop*. Otherwise he would not begin to see the world as a whole – “at a single glance and in all its details” as the Rg Veda so beautifully puts it:– “Give sight to our eyes, give sight to our bodies, that we may see. May we see the world at a single glance and in all its details” (R.V.X. 158.4). Only thus the theologian would be a “ṛṣi”. He would “see” something like the splendour of the Transfigured Lord of Matthew 17:2 or the Gita II. He would “see” – and seeing, shine as did the face of Moses. He would shine upon and illuminate others for him whom He sees and beholds in the Bliss-Reality which is Himself *Svayamprakāśam* Self-luminosity. “This Indwell-

ing, all-pervading Absolute is the shining light by whom all else shines" (Svet. Up. VI. 23). This seeing "in all its detail" and "in a single glance" makes too for the "Harmony" or *Samanvaya* in terms of which Hindu religious experience is often spoken of. The search for *Samanvaya* is for the presence of "the Self in all things and of all things in the Self" (Up. 7); the revelatory presence of God in all things as seen by Francis or Chardin. This is surely one of the characteristics of Indian culture and spirituality - "to conceive reality in its totality. This has its consequence also in theologizing. A new vision of the world will emerge. The Spirit that dwells within man is also the life of the whole universe. This will lead to a spiritual understanding of the world itself. Everything will appear as the epiphany of God, progressing towards that final manifestation of the Cosmic Christ".<sup>36</sup>

Basically then the Experience consists in a vision of "something", an intuition, a feeling of something that stands beyond, behind, the passing flux of immediate things, something like "the ecstasy of an awakening in Kena Up. ii -- which opens the door of life eternal. For a man who has known Him, the light of truth shines". "Ah" -- in the twinkling of an eye -- thanks to Uma, who might be said to prefigure Mary, 'Seat of Wisdom, who by her intervention - intercession - makes man wise (a seer' - a 'ṛṣi'). And Indra knows who Brahman is; though he may not be able to interpret or express his intuitive experience.

#### IX. Interpretation - expression of experience

To interpret this experience, one has to use paradox, symbol, myth, signs (Paul Tillich speaks of "God above God")<sup>37</sup>. The realities apprehended in religious experience exceed the powers of the human mind to describe and define. This experience is not simply something subjective; it corresponds to an objective reality.

36. Paul Puthanangady: Indian Theology, Liturgy & Spirituality. NBCLC Seminar Leaflet Series 20. Bangalore.

37. Tillich: "God above God" article in *Dialogue*, Sri Lanka (Nov. - Dec. '75 Vol. 2 No. 3).

For the Buddhist, for instance, it would matter very little whether an experience has an external, objective reality or not, as Dr. Dharmasiri said, what matters is the experience itself. "All I know is that it is one of my experiences and that I know it is an experience. That is all. I do not go beyond that." A theist will project that experience and give it the name of Brahman or God. A Buddhist does not need to do that. And in any case who can really name the "Nameless" - even with a "Thousand Names"?

Gerald O'Collins in *Theology and Experience*<sup>38</sup> quotes T. S. Eliot: "We had the experience but missed the meaning." All experience bears with it a certain meaning and purposefulness, but there is nothing more difficult than discerning, interpreting and remembering one's personal experience. Often our pre-conditioning and the mindset we bring into play may prevent us from hearing the experience. The Zen student who asked his master why he had poured tea all over the floor reminds one of the attitude of some of our theologians. The Master answered: "Because I feel your head is like a tea-cup - so overflowing with ideas, that it is impossible to add anything to what you know. You cannot bear what I say." Perhaps Jesus, too can say: "I have many things to say to you, but you cannot hear them now", because we are far too cerebral; our hearts are neither empty nor still enough. Only a powerful conversion can bring about a "horizon shift".

Interpretation is the intellectual explanation of the experience, while expression is its manifestation, emanation. The expression need not take the form of words. We have tended to confine our Christian-experience communication to this level only. It may be done in silence - as in the Hindu tradition. In the Brahmanubhav Upaniṣad (20) we read: I am without speech; often a deep experience can only be expressed in silence. Or it may be done by the whole body, or by one's whole way of living. For, as Narad says of the true *bhakta* - he makes the devotee (through this new experience) to become

---

38. Gerald O'Collins: "Theology and Experience" in *Irish Theological Quarterly* (Vol. XIV No. 4. 1977, p. 279ff.)

"according to Him":- *anubhava yati bhaktan* (*Narad Bhakti Sutra* 80). There is *metanoia*: - the *anubhav* transforms and divinises him; makes him, in fact, turns into Himself, through grace. This conversion of heart is expressed in his life.

Panikkar speaks of four archetypes of the Ultimate<sup>39</sup> - the ways in which different traditions of the East and West have described the Supreme experience. One may be more visible in one tradition than in another, but more and more all four are being found in all. It is, I think, important that we recognize which is of most significance for us in India. Some have the tendency to stress 1) the Transcendent, some 2) the Immanent; others 3) the Transcendent character of the Immanent (like the Buddhists), or, 4) the Immanent character of the Transcendent (like the Chinese religions and the modern secular spirit). The aspect of transcendence is typical of the Semitic religions - Judaism, Christianity, Islam. It is masculine in spirit. The distinction between God and us is zealously guarded. The Immanent aspect of Transcendence is the Hindu type. It is feminine Brahman who is Transcendent is experienced but is not "known" as Brahman, for with knowledge comes distance. It is like a mother - nurturing from below rather than commanding from above. The *Nirvana* and *Sunya* experience of the Buddhist is the Transcendent aspect of the Immanent. It is neuter. There is so radical an immanence that only by transcending all that is built upon it, can one reach the Ultimate. Everything one can conceive of is set aside so that *Sunya* (pure nothingness) can emerge. Immanent Immanence is secular which says there is no other world than this. It is personal. The Supreme Experience is that of the sage who accepts the human condition, who plunges into the real situation of the world without transcending it.

Existence, however approached, is to be experienced.

Klostermeir reminds us how Existence can only be experienced.<sup>40</sup> When Christ was asked for a "proof", He told His would-be philosophers of religion that they should do what He

39. R. Panikkar: "The Ultimate Experience in *Theology Digest* (Aut. 72).

40. K. Klostermeir: *Kristvidya* (ISPCK Delhi) p. 15.

said – then they would see for themselves. “If anyone is prepared to do His will, then he would know whether my teaching is from God or myself” (Jn. 7:17). This reminds one of Kathopaniṣad:- “The only proof of His Existence is union with Him” (IV 12-13). Jesus Christ continually insisted on this union with His Father – that His teaching, indeed His very being – his Self – was from the Father.

## X. An “Āśramic” theology

Perhaps another important characteristic of an Indian theology based on Experience is what I would like to call *Āśramic* if I may be allowed to coin the word. It would be near in spirit to what is called in the Western Church, a ‘Monastic’ Theology. Don Leclercq shows how the existence of such a theology is acknowledged even today, and how it fulfils the conditions of a theology defined by Yves Congar.<sup>41</sup> I will not enter into the discussion of this definition here. Nor do I choose to call it a ‘Monastic’ Theology partly because today, especially in the West but perhaps also in India, the word seems unpalatable to many, thought to be utterly irrelevant in an age of “involvement” and “insertion”. But the word “Āśramic” seems more appropriate; It is an Indian concept: It does not smack of an “enclosure” associated with monasticism, for an Āśram is by its very nature, “open” and often the most contemplative are the most involved and concerned for the world.

In the Europe of the twelfth century Christian reflection was carried on in monasteries and town schools. The former were open to the latter and the theology which flourished in the monasteries had some distinctive features which, to my mind, would seem to suit admirably an Indian theology based on experience:-

- 1) “Seeking God” which is the primary “work” in an Āśram<sup>42</sup> also determined monastic knowledge, for it is also the primary

---

41. Dom Jean Leclercq: *L'Amour des Lettres et le Desir de Dieu* cf. the chapter “La Théologie Monastique.”

42. Statement of the All India Consultation on Ashrams held in June 1978 at NBCLC, Bangalore.

end of monasticism. And even though the *āśramite* or monk often does things to fulfil the needs of the Church, in the measure that he remains a "monk" or *āśramite*, his theology is marked by a certain nuance of a mystic heart-knowledge which one would find in the most speculative work of an Anselm but not in that of a scholastic.

2) More of prayer than reading would be another characteristic of an '*āśramic*' theology. In the monastery, religious thought went hand in hand with the spiritual life; seeking truth with seeking perfection (through *sadhana*). Today one often hears theologians complain they are spiritually dried up even while they study tomes "about" God. A "theologian" after three years' study in Oxford said: "I cannot bear to hear another word about God", the longing for prayer was there but was found difficult. An *āśramic* Theology would prevent this state of affairs, for *sadhana* would be a part—an essential and major part—of theologizing.

3) A theology which is also a *sadhana*. *Sadhana* is the cure of Hinduism and its main method of knowing Brahman. It involves detailed practices as well as insights, for religion in India is a way of life rather than a formulated faith. Klaus Klostermeier used to say that this characteristic of Indian theology may answer one of the Western man's most pressing needs—the need to find a unity of purpose in life. Also, in the *Āśramic* type of theology and looking at the *sadhana* structure of the Hindu system, the Christian theologian will feel a need to look again at Christian asceticism. When one lives in Hindu *āśrams* one begins to see how fruitfully and naturally the asceticism of Cassian, Benedict or Basil can be reactivated today—in a world where asceticism is hardly looked at as something relevant.

4) Scripture and the Fathers rather than philosophers would be sought after, studied and used even in their modes of expression. This was one of the basic differences between monastic and scholastic theology. Monks spoke rather in Biblical imagery which contained a certain richness and obscurity proper to the mystery which it expressed. *Geramus morem Scripturas*, said St. Bernard; whereas the scholastic seeking clarity used

abstract philosophical terms. Though a certain dialectic is inevitable in theology, from the 9th century onwards the scholastic procedure was *Disputare* which often led to *pugnae verborum* (1 Tim 6:6). This way of discussion could be accomplished independent of any religious experience. Most theologizing in India can profitably be done by *Bhasyas* written on Scripture passages, arising out of the theologian's personal meditation and experiential knowledge rather than based on books and borrowed experience.

5) *Ekāgrata* or one-pointedness which is a characteristic of Indian spirituality would be the equivalent of *Sancta Simplicitas* which was recommended psychologically and morally. The complexity which went with the activity of the mind led to multiplicity and diversity – a sort of agitation which ill-favoured the contemplative response in “pure prayer”. It took many from single-minded God-seeking and dispersed attention to numerous problems, objections, argumentations. The role of simplicity was stressed in Monastic theology to ensure peace and humility of heart, and one-pointedness in seeking God. “Dieu seul - tout la reste y comprise la recherche intellectuelle, doit demeurer subordonnée à la recherche de Dieu.”<sup>43</sup> Hence the insistence of St. Benedict on the degree of Humility. “Theology is not an activity”, as Chethimattam rightly says, “that builds up a tower of Babel – but rather the digging up of the human channel through which the heavenly Ganges can descend and flow”.<sup>44</sup>

6) Knowledge that is Love rather than mere intellectual knowledge was recommended by theologians who were saints and mystics. In the fourteenth century Richard Rolle and others fought against intellectualism which led to pride, condemning “ces docteurs tout gonflés d'argumentations compliquées.”<sup>45</sup> “God has not willed to depend on dialectics for the salvation of his people”, wrote Ambrose. (De Fide 1.5). The theologian's end is what the Upaniṣads call “the End of all Love longing”. – Mascaro's translation of “Tad vanam”. In the

43. Dom J. Leclercq: idem.

44. J. B. Chethimattam: “The Spirit and Orientation of an Indian Theology” *Jeevadhara* (Vol. 1, 1971) p. 452.

45. Dom J. Leclercq: idem.

Kena Upaniṣad only when Uma, the goddess of wisdom, explains Brahman as Tad Vanam, does Indra have some understanding of the Reality. If, as we have insisted above, the theologian is a man who prays, he will inevitably find that his theologizing is less cerebral and more of the heart. He will be in spirit a "spouse", a bride, a lover of God. "A lover does not seek the Beloved for vain reasonings and human curiosity. She asks for a kiss.... Knowledge which is given in the form of a kiss one receives with love. A kiss is a sign of love. Knowledge which puffs up is without love....".<sup>46</sup>

The heart in the Upaniṣads too is given a pre-eminent place (cf. Mahānārāyaṇa Br̥had), 4. 4. 32). *Hṛdayam* - etymologically "hṛ-di ayam" - He is in the heart (Chandog. 8. 3. 3). All that exists is rooted in the heart (Br̥had. 3. 2. 22; 3. 9. 22, etc). The heart for the Hindus is the most intimate and deepest function of man, where the progressive process of interiorisation comes to an end. It is also the place of pure awareness, of the psychological experience of the Absolute. The heart is nothing else but the link of continuity between man's experience of the Absolute and man's experience of contingency in the ever-changing world. This is the fundamental intuition of Hinduism in a nut-shell.<sup>47</sup> The heart is the interior life of man. In the Old Testament it appears more than a thousand times. Our Lord tells us, it is from the heart that comes all that a man does and says (Mt. 12. 33; 15: 18). Theology too then must come from the heart. Only such theologizing will be relevant to India.

7) Activity of the Spirit in one's interior was stressed by Monastic theology and would be another characteristic of *āśramic* theology. If theology is grounded in experience, "this experience is openness in faith to the activity of the Spirit in

46. St. Bernard: *Super Cant. 8. 5-6* cf. is teaching on "an internal knowledge" of God.

47. Van Troy S. J., "The Heart for the Hindu and Christian" *Tatverivek*. St. Mary's Kurseong. Jan 1958. Even if one may not agree with all that the author says, he gives some interesting insights on the role of "the heart" in Hindu spirituality.

one's interior". "They are the children of God who are led by the Spirit of God." Experience of this Spirit of freedom and Spirit of prayer, who expresses Himself in the heart of creation with deep groaning is the starting point of an authentic theology. The Spirit is the centre and focal point of all life and experience. He is the real *Tapas*, the convergence of all spiritual energy.<sup>48</sup> An *āśram* is naturally a place of *tapas* where the fire of the Spirit directs and consumes all.

8) An Interiorised Theology is naturally what monastic and āśramic theology would be. The theological method of the monks is characterised by their insistence on Experience, to which their knowledge of the faith should lead them. The twofold character of this theology was: i) salvation - history forming the objective aspect of man's relation with God (*Oikonomia*) as related in Scriptures and lived out in the Liturgy; ii) the subjective element - which interiorises the mystery. Even in the first category Biblical commentaries (*Bhaṣya*) were their usual mode of theologizing (cf. Rupert de Deutz and Eadmer Canterbury). Thus for St. Bernard and the Cistercians - because of the importance given to Christian anthropology (as today again) - it is not so much acquiring the knowledge of God's salvific plan as consenting to this plan that mattered. It is a question of interiority, how the work of salvation becomes man's good in his interior life. In this domain which is more of mysticism than of speculation, the monks were Augustinian. His idea of interior illumination which prolongs in us the Light which the Incarnate Word has brought to the world is like the light of the world becoming the *Antarjyot*; the mystery of love uniting all their theology from within. If "Economy" is the manifestation of God's love for us, "Anthropology" is the realisation in us, the application to each one of us, of this love of God. "One cannot know the Father fully if one does not love Him perfectly" (Bernard Sup. Cant. 8. 9). Christ knew the Father fully because He loved Him perfectly. In Him alone the fulness of the Godhead internally experienced becomes externally realised. "Only in the Fatherhood of God is the opposition between man's internal vision and external experience brought to a unity. Thus the Trinitarian

48. Chethimittam, ibidem.

mystery would be the ground and starting point of an Indian Theology – an ‘interiorized’ theology in the sense of its arising from, and leading us to, the Inner Life of God. Indian theology will not be primarily concerned with the historical Christ – except in as much as He is the externalized expression of the Inner Experience of God, in God – “a climatic point for the exteriorisation of interior experience”. For some Rama or Kṛṣṇa or Buddha may play the same role. The important thing is the realisation of the *Anubhav*, being able to use the *Anubhav Mantra* (*Aham Brahmasmi*) when one is so caught up in the Interior Life of the Trinity, that there is no ‘I’ or ‘Thou’ left. This would have intelligibility for India.

9) Silence is the fundamental intuition in the Eastern and Aśramic Experience. In expressing this experience of depth ‘two contrasting attitudes are found in the spiritual history of mankind:- those of the Prophetic religions and of the Eastern religions. Monotheistic religions think of man as confronted by Another, an All-Other, so fundamentally that all notions of “other” that we can conceive are transcended:- the Yahweh of the Bible, the Allah of the Koran. In contrast to this, in the Eastern religions the ‘I’ which man thinks and pronounces all day is burnt up in the encounter of St. Paul’s “I live now, no longer I”. There is place only for silence, “not the silence of one who has ceased speaking for there is no one left to speak”. ‘I am the Lord, there is no other’ is to be understood in its absoluteness: the One without a second of Hinduism. In the Aśramic theology this fundamental intuition of silence would have a role to play. One can see perhaps why sages like Buddha refused to answer questions about God. The Christian, so quick to talk of God easily fall into definitions, phenomena, thought, and signs, and no “sign” will satisfy the Hindu for whom God is only *Tad*. We have to learn courage to enter into the silence and darkness of the *garbha grha* in our hearts.

10) Finally, the aśramic, like the monastic, would be a “lived” theology. A lived way of knowing the mystery. For though the monks engaged in much speculation, it was never of prime importance as with the scholastics. For them as for the Aśramic theology, it was rather “une théologie vécue, une théologie pour

la vie". In India religion, spirituality and therefore theology are not a matter of formulae but a way of life. The experience of her saints forms the origin and vitality of Hinduism, not her doctrines.

### Conclusion

I would like to end with what many mystics have said of God in the words of Lao Tse and can only pray that Indian theologians may begin to evolve an experience-based theology rooted in their personal *sadhana* – a "Come and See" theology for Non-Christian India, a theology that is feminine, of the heart, pneumatic, and "āśramic".

"Look and it cannot be seen; for it is beyond form.  
Listen and it cannot be heard"; it is beyond sound.  
Grasp, and it cannot be held; it is intangible.

These three are indefinable and therefore they are joined. From above it is not bright. From below it is not dark....The form of the Formless, the image of the Imageless. It is called the Indefinable beyond imagination. Stand before it, there is no beginning. Follow it, there is no end.<sup>49</sup>

Sophia College  
Bombay

Vandana

---

49. Lao Tse: Teachings No. 40.

# Mystical Theology in the Indian Tradition

'To rethink everything in terms of theology', in the words of Pere de Lubac to Abbe Monchanin, 'and to rethink theology in terms of mysticism', would seem to be the task of the theologian in India to-day. It is this mystical basis of theology, which we will seek to elucidate in this paper. We shall take as our starting point the mystical tradition in India, where mystical theology seems to have originated, and we then shall seek to see Christian theology in the light of this mystical tradition. The source of this mystical theology is to be found in the *Upaniṣads* (about 600 B.C.) and it comes to a head in the *Bhagavad Gita* (about 300 B.C.). It is in this short period that the Indian mystical tradition (which included also the Buddhist and the Jain traditions) had its flowering, and from this source the Indian mystical tradition has been fed ever since. It is this tradition that we need to incorporate in our theology, if we are to have a genuine Indian Christian theology.

## The vedic tradition

The *Upaniṣads* derive, of course, from the Vedic tradition and are, in fact, called the *Vedanta*, or 'end' of the *Vedas*. It was in them that the mystical tradition, which had its roots in the *Vedas* came to flower. The decisive moment seems to have been when the fire-sacrifice, which had originally been an external sacrifice, came to be interiorised and conceived symbolically. It was then that the word *Brahman*, which had been used as the *mantra*, the sacred utterance by which the sacrifice was effected and which therefore contained the hidden power of the sacrifice, came to be conceived as the hidden power behind the universe. The ṛgis meditating in the forest came to realise the hidden power of Brahman within himself, and so Brahman came to be identified with *Atman*, the inner Self. Another development took place when the *Puruṣa* of the *Rg Veda*, the primeval Man, from whose sacrifice the world came into being, was conceived as the source of all, and this Cosmic

Person was realised as dwelling in man and so identified with Brahman and Atman. These three terms, Brahman, Atman, Puruṣa, which thus originate in the Vedas become in the Upaniṣads the names for the hidden mystery of the universe and the whole mystical theology of the Upaniṣads and the Gita is built round these three terms.

### The tradition of the Upanisads

This can be seen clearly in the Brhadaranyaka Upaniṣad at the very beginning of the Upaniṣadic tradition. 'In the beginning', it is said, 'this was Brahman, one only', and again: 'In the beginning this was the Atman only in the form of Person (Puruṣa).'<sup>1</sup> Thus the Brahman, who is also Atman and Puruṣa, is conceived as the original source of Being, and this Being is 'one only', or as it will later be said 'one without a second'.<sup>2</sup> This Being is also said to pervade the universe: 'He entered there even to the tips of the finger-nails',<sup>3</sup> and to be 'the end or goal, the object of all desire: That is dearer than a son, dearer than wealth, dearer than anything else'.<sup>4</sup> We have therefore at the every beginning of the Upaniṣadic tradition an understanding of an original Source of Being, which is one only, which pervades the universe and which is the object of all desire. In the Chandogya Upaniṣad this is expressed by saying: 'All this is Brahman'.<sup>5</sup> This is one of those sayings which give rise to the charge of pantheism, and we need to rid our minds of this idea from the beginning. There is no pantheism, properly speaking, in the Upaniṣads. There is language which can be interpreted (and has been interpreted) pantheistically but this must be taken in the context of the whole revelation in which the Brahman is conceived as at once totally immanent and totally transcendent. We can see this clearly even in this text of the Chandogya Upaniṣad, which immediately goes on: 'Let a man meditate on that (the world) as 'tajjalān' which

1. B. U. 1. 4. 10 and 11.

2. cf. C. U. 6. 2. 1.

3. B. U. 1. 4. 7.

4. B. U. 1. 4. 8.

5. C. U. 3. 14. 1.

Sankara interprets as 'beginning, continuing and breathing in it (Brahman)', and the text goes on: He who consists of mind, whose body is life, whose form is light, whose will (*sankalpa*) is truth, whose Self is like space (*akasatma*), from whom all works, all desires, all odours and all tastes proceed, being without speech and undisturbed, is my Self within the heart smaller than a grain of rice, of barley, of mustard seed, of millet or the kernel of a grain of millet; this is my Self within the heart, greater than the earth, greater than the sky, greater than the heavens, greater than these worlds'.<sup>6</sup>

This text brings us face to face with the fundamental intuition of the Upaniṣads. This Brahman which is the Source of all creation, from which everything comes and to which everything returns, of which the universe is the manifestation in 'name and form', is one with the Atman, the inner Self of man, dwelling in the heart as the inner Ruler (*antaryāmin*).<sup>7</sup> Now this is essentially a mystical intuition. The words Brahman and Atman are signs which point to an infinite mystery, which cannot be expressed in words. The decisive text on this is that of the Brhadaranyaka Upaniṣad: 'Next follows the teaching *neti, neti* (not this, not this), for there is nothing higher than this (that it is) not this'.<sup>8</sup> This is the basis of all mystical theology, this recognition that the ultimate Reality cannot be named, cannot be properly conceived. St. Thomas (depending on Dionysius the Areopagite) is clear about this as Sankara or Nagarjuna or the Sufi mystics. This is the foundation of all theology, this understanding that the ultimate mystery of Being, by whatever name it is known, whether Brahman, Atman in Hinduism or Nirvana, Sunyata, in Buddhism or Allah or Yahweh or God, cannot properly be named or conceived. All words which are used about this mystery are signs or symbols of the ineffable and are of value only in so far as they point towards this mystery and enable its presence to be experienced in the 'heart' or the inner 'centre' of the person beyond speech and thought.

6. C. U. 3. 14. 1. 3.
7. B. U. 3. 7. 1.
8. B. U. 2. 3. 6.

### The mystical experience of the Upanisads

The Hindu approach to this mystery is by way of the exploration of consciousness. The Brahman, which is the Source of all, the beginning and end of creation, is present in the heart of man as the Source of consciousness. It is 'the great Being, infinite, limitless, consisting of nothing but knowledge (*vijnana-ghana*)',<sup>9</sup> or in a still more striking phrase, 'the Person of light, consisting of knowledge (*vijnana-maya*) within the heart'.<sup>10</sup> But this presence cannot be known by the senses or by the rational mind. 'It is unseen but seeing; unheard but hearing; unperceived but perceiving, unknown but knowing'.<sup>11</sup> The disciple has to be taught to go beyond the outer senses and the inner mind, the physical and psychic worlds, in order to know the true Self within. As the Mandukya Upaniṣad puts it, it is beyond the waking state and the dream state, beyond even the state of deep sleep, where both sense and mind are at rest. It is the 'fourth' state *turiya* - the state beyond our present mode of consciousness.<sup>12</sup> In the Katha Upaniṣad it is shown how the disciple must go through death and be instructed by Yama, the God of death, if he is to know that which lies beyond. Only then can he awake to the supreme reality and 'recognise the Ancient, who is difficult to be seen, who has entered into the dark, who is hidden in the cave, who dwells in the abyss as God'.<sup>13</sup> This is the supreme knowledge, which cannot be attained by argument, or by learning or by the Scriptures, but which is given to him whom the Self chooses.<sup>14</sup> This conception of the supreme knowledge as a gift of grace is found both in the Katha and in the Mundaka Upaniṣad and is undoubtedly an authentic part of the Upaniṣadic tradition, though Sankara was unable to accept it.

This knowledge of the Supreme is expressed in the Upaniṣads by the great *mahavakyas* - 'I am Brahman' - 'Thou art

9. B. U. 2. 4. 12.

10. B. U. 4. 3. 7.

11. B. U. 3. 8. 11.

12. Man. U. 7.

13. K. U. 2. 12.

14. K. U. 2. 23.

That'. How are we to understand these expressions? It is clear that they are the expression of a mystical experience, which cannot be properly expressed. Sankara, at least as he is generally understood, interprets them in terms of identity. But it seems that even in Sankara it is possible that his understanding was deeper than it appears, and the words are certainly capable of a more profound interpretation. In the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* we have the image of the 'two, who have entered into the cave, the seat of the Supreme'.<sup>15</sup> In the *Svetāśvatara Upaniṣad* this is elaborate in the following terms. 'Two birds, inseparable friends, cling to the same tree. One eats the sweet fruit, the other looks on without eating'. This is then interpreted: 'On the same tree man sits grieving, immersed, bewildered by his impotence. But when he sees the Other, the Lord (*Iśa*) and knows his glory, his grief passes away'.<sup>16</sup> The two birds are, of course, the *jīvatman* and the *p̄ramatman*, the individual and the supreme Self. What is the relation between them? It is possible to interpret this relation in terms of an image in a mirror. The image in the mirror is not different from the original in that it is one and the same reality which is present in the reflection and in the original. But the image in the mirror has not the same kind of reality as the original. It has a wholly relative reality. In this sense the image and the original are 'not two'. Sankara himself uses the image of the sun reflected in different pools of water. It is one and the same sun which is reflected in each pool; there is only one Being, but it is reflected in a multitude of different forms. In each pool it is one and the same sun which is reflected and yet each is different. It would seem that this conception would come as near as possible to a true interpretation of the intuition of the *Upaniṣads*. In the *Upaniṣads* it is not suggested that the world is unreal. In the *Svetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, where the word *maya* is used, it signified no more than that which is 'made', while the maker is the *mayin*'.<sup>17</sup>

If this explanation is accepted, then the sayings, 'I am Brahman', Thou art That, can be interpreted in the sense that

15. K. U. 3. 1.

16. S. U. 4. 6. and 7.

17. S. U. 4. 10.

there is one Reality, one Being, which when conceived as the Source or Ground of creation is called Brahman, and when conceived as the Source or Ground of consciousness is called Atman. Each created thing and each individual soul is an image or reflection as in a mirror of this one Reality. The image has its own relative reality. It is not unreal, but neither is it wholly real, since its whole being is from another. In our present mode of consciousness we see this one reality, reflected in the mirror of this created world. But when we awake to *paramvidya*, to the supreme knowledge, then we see that one Reality alone, in which all the images are contained. When this awakening takes place then there is no more duality.<sup>18</sup> Then the person knows himself, not as reflected through his senses or his mental consciousness but in his original state, in the Ground of his eternal being and consciousness, and in this knowledge he experiences absolute bliss. This is the supreme knowledge; the soul comes to know its Self in its original Beings (*sat*), and this knowledge (*cit*) brings absolute Bliss (*ananda*). Thus as far as it can be named this state of being is called *Saccidananda*. But the word is only a pointer to a reality, which has to be experienced. The *Jñani* (Knower) is one who has experienced this state of being and is able to communicate his knowledge to another, when he is ready to receive it. In other words this is a mystical experience, in which the soul knows itself in its original Ground of Being, beyond sense and reason, where all differences as conceived by the mind disappear and the one Reality is experienced without duality in a unitive vision, which communicates absolute Bliss.

It cannot be doubted that this mystical experience to which the Upanisads bear witness is one of the most profound experiences of God, or of absolute Truth, in human history, and any theology in India which is worthy of the name, has to take account of this experience and integrate it in the total experience of Christian faith. It is clear that if we accept the view that the created world is an image or reflection of the un-created Being, or Brahman, and that the human soul by a free gift of grace – ‘he whom the Atman chooses, he knows the Atman’ – is able to know Brahman by an intuitive knowledge of

---

18. cf. B. U. 2. 4. 13.

its inner Self, and that even this knowledge cannot be attained, as the Kaṭha Upaniṣad again says, 'unless evil ways are abandoned, and there is rest in the senses, concentration in the mind and peace in the heart' <sup>19</sup>; it is clear that there is nothing contrary to Christian faith in such a conception. Translating it into Christian terms we can say that the Spirit illuminates the mind by its own free action and the soul comes to know itself as the Image of God made in the likeness of Christ, in whom the Father, the original source of Being, reveals himself.

### The experience of a Personal God

But we have now to consider the third aspect of ultimate reality in the Upaniṣadic tradition together with Brahman and Atman, namely Puruṣa. The concept of Puruṣa derives from the famous Puruṣa Sukta in the Ṛg Veda, where he appears as the primeval Cosmic man through whose sacrifice the world comes into being. This Puruṣa is akin to the Adam Kadmon of the Hebrew tradition, and the later Universal Man - Al insan al kamil - of Muslim tradition, and may be further related to the Son of Man of the Biblical tradition. It is a key concept for Christology in India. The Puruṣa is the archetypal Man, who pervades the whole creation and at the same time transcends it. One quarter of him, as it is said rather crudely, is here on earth, three fourths are above in heaven.<sup>20</sup> This is linked with the idea which is fundamental in the Vedic tradition, that man is a microcosm. Man is a little image of the universe. The best translation of Puruṣa therefore seems to be that of Person. Puruṣa is the Person in the earth, in the water, in the fire and in the air, in the whole creation and in the human being, and this 'bright immortal Person is the same as the Atman, the immortal, the Brahman, the All'.<sup>21</sup>

It is important to see from the outset that Brahman, Atman and Puruṣa are different names for the one ineffable reality. The late Professor Zaehner has caused a good deal of confusion by his well-meaning attempt to exalt Puruṣa above Brahman and Atman, but all the evidence shows that they are

19. K. U. 2. 24.

20. R. V. 10. 90.

21. B. U. 2. 5. 1.

names for the one Reality seen from a different point of view. Whereas Brahman is the name of that Reality conceived as the ultimate Ground or Source of the Universe, and Atman the name of that Reality conceived as the Ground or Source of consciousness in man, Puruṣa is the name of that one Reality conceived in relation to man and the universe as Lord (*Iśa*). An indication of this is given in the Bṛhadaranyaka Upaniṣad where it is said: 'If a man clearly beholds this Atman as God (*deva*) and as the Lord (*Iśan*) of all that is and will be, then he is no more afraid'.<sup>22</sup> Though the word Puruṣa is not used here, it is clear that we have here in the Bṛhadaranyaka, that is in the earliest tradition of the Upaniṣads, a clear affirmation of the personal character of the Atman. But it is in the Kaṭha Upaniṣad that we find the clearest expression of the place of Puruṣa in the universal plan, where it is said: 'Beyond the senses is the mind (*manas*) beyond the mind is the intellect (*buddhi*), beyond the intellect is the cosmic order (*mahat*), beyond the cosmic order is the Unmanifest' (the *avyakta*), and beyond the Unmanifest is Puruṣa. Beyond Puruṣa there is nothing - that is the end, that is the highest goal'.<sup>23</sup> This passage is important because it not only affirms the supremacy of Puruṣa as the ultimate End but also shows the path of ascent to that goal. The path of ascent to God is through the senses to the mind, the *manas*, the lower mind which acts through the senses, in other words the scientific mind; then from the mind to the intellect, (*buddhi*), the *nous* of Aristotle, the *intellectus* of St. Thomas as opposed to the ratio, the lower mind. From this one has to pass to the *mahat*, the Great Self, or Cosmic Mind. This corresponds with the world of the Gods, the Angels of Christian tradition, the Cosmic order. Then we pass to the Unmanifest, the *avyakta*. This is the *mula-prakṛti*, the Root Nature, in which all that is later to become manifest in creation, exists in its causes, the '*rationes seminales*' of St. Augustine. Finally one passes to the Puruṣa Person, who is the Source and the Goal of all.

For the full development of the concept of Puruṣa we have to turn to the Śvetasvatara Upaniṣad. Here there is no

22. B. U. 4. 4. 15.

23. K. U. 2. 12.

doubt that Puruṣa is the name for the Supreme Being. Of him it is said (in words which were very dear to Swami Abhisikta-nanda): 'I know that great Puruṣa of sunlike lustre beyond the darkness; only by knowing him, one passes beyond death; there is no other path to go.'<sup>24</sup> The whole universe is filled with this Puruṣa. He is the great Lord. Like the Puruṣa of the R̥g Veda he compasses the earth on every side and at the same time extends beyond it.<sup>25</sup> In other words Puruṣa is the Cosmic Person, the Lord, the Creator, the Self of all, and is one with the Brahman, the vast, hidden in all creatures and alone enveloping all things; knowing him as the Lord men become immortal.<sup>26</sup> The attempt of Professor Zaehner in this passage to make Brahman inferior to Puruṣa seems to me to be quite unconvincing. But it must always be remembered that these terms Brahman, Atman and Puruṣa can all alike be used at different levels of meaning. They can be used of the one Supreme, the Parabrahman, the Paramatman, the Puruṣottaman, or they can be used of the one Being as immanent in the creation, or they can be used even of the created being, the universe, the individual soul, and even the body as manifestations of the one Being. This is where spiritual discernment is required. This is not to say that there has not been a development in the doctrine of the Upaniṣads, especially in the understanding of the character of the Personal God. By meditation on the Brahman as the Atman, the inner Self, the understanding grows of Puruṣa as the Supreme Person, the one, transcendent Being, manifesting himself both in the universe and in man, and recognised now as an object of worship. This is the point where the concept of *bhakti* enters. Following the growth of the Bhagavata movement (perhaps in the 4th or 3rd century B.C.) with its devotion (*bhakti*) to a personal God, the Puruṣa comes to be recognised as the supreme Person; 'The Supreme Lord of lords, the highest deity of deities, the supreme master of masters, the transcendent, let us know as God, the Lord of the world, the adorable.'<sup>27</sup> This development of the concept of Puruṣa comes to a head in the Bhagavad Gita. Here we find first the distinction between Puruṣa and Prakṛti

24. S. U. 3. 8.

25. S. U. 3. 14.

26. S. U. 3. 7.

27. S. U. 6. 7.

(nature) as found in the Samkhya philosophy, but this is then carried a stage further and it is said 'In this world there are two Persons, the one perishable (*kṣara*), the other imperishable (*akṣara*); the perishable is all contingent beings, the imperishable they call the one set on high (*kuta-stha*). But then beyond this imperishable there is revealed another Person.' There is another Person, the highest (*uttamah*), called the supreme Self (*Paramatman*), who enters and supports the three worlds, the Lord who passes not away.'<sup>28</sup> Thus in the Bhagavad Gita the figure of the *Puruṣottaman*, the supreme Person, emerges, who is identified with the Supreme Self, the Paramatman. To this Person all praise and worship and adoration is due and with him his worshippers is united so as to become Brahman (*Brahma-bhuta*) 'By love he comes to know me as I really am, who and what I am, and knowing me as I am, he enters into me.'<sup>29</sup>

This is the culmination of the Hindu quest for God. The Brahman, the Supreme Being from whom the whole creation comes, has been recognised as the Supreme Self, the Ground of human being and consciousness, and this Self has now been recognised as the Supreme Person, the Lord who is to be worshipped and adored and to this Person the human soul is united by love when it enters into him and becomes one with him. The nature of this union by love was indicated already in the Bṛhadaranyaka Upaniṣad, when it was said: 'As a man when embraced by his beloved wife knows nothing that is without, nothing that is within, so this person when in the embrace of the intelligent Self (*prajnanatman*) knows nothing that is without, nothing that is within.'<sup>30</sup> The union with God by love can no more be described than the experience of oneness, or non-duality, by knowledge. Both are experiences of ultimate reality, which cannot be expressed in words. Each of the metaphysical doctrines, whether *advaita*, *viśiṣṭadvaita* or *dvaita*, which have been developed as an interpretation of this experience, has its own value, but none of them is definitive, and we are free to seek for a more adequate interpretation. It would seem that the Christian understanding of the communion of natures (*puruṣas*) in the Person (*Puruṣa*) of

28. B. G. 15. 16 and 17.

29. B. G. 18. 54 and 55.

30. B. U. 4. 3. 21.

Christ, and at the same time of the communion of Persons in the Godhead may give a new insight into this mystery. If man experiences God as Love and as communicating himself in love, so as to unite the human being with the divine, this can only be because there is love in God himself and love implies relationship. Jesus experienced himself in relation to God as Son to the Father, communicating in the love of the Spirit. The Spirit (*Atman*) in man on this understanding is a communication of the Spirit of God, which is Love, by which man is united with the Person of God (*puruṣottaman*) and in union of love with that Person knows himself as one with the ultimate Ground of Being, the One without a second (*Parabrahman*).

### The manifestation of the Personal God

On these lines it is possible to see how the Vedantic experience of Brahman could be related to the Christian experience of God in Trinity. But this experience of God in the Spirit also involves an experience of God in man and in the creation. In the Vedic experience the 'one being' (*ekam sat*) manifests himself in the creation under different 'names and forms'. The gods of the Vedas are the names and forms of the one Reality manifesting itself in nature and in man. They correspond to the 'Cosmic Powers' of St Paul and the Angels of Christian tradition. But there is always a movement in Hindu thought to unite all the gods in one, to see in each god the totality of the Godhead. In the Vedas Varuna and then Hiranyagarbha, the Golden Seed, later Viśvakarma and Prajapati, all tend to be identified with the Supreme Being. But in the Epics and Puranas their place is taken by Brahma, Viṣṇu and Siva, and these remain the principal names of the Supreme God in India today. In the concept of the *Trimurti*, Brahma represents the Creator, and may be compared with the Father; Viṣṇu, the Pervader represents God immanent in creation and appearing in the form of an *avatara*, and may be compared with the Son; while Siva is the Power in nature which is at once creative and destructive, continually destroying and renewing the creation and in man destroying sin and renewing with his grace. He may therefore be compared with the Spirit in Christianity. These are, of course, only analogies and the differences are important. Yet these are all profound symbols of the Godhead, of the ultimate mystery.

of Being, which have sprung from the depths of the Indian soul and still remain deeply meaningful to millions of Hindus. They are latent in the Indian psyche and should be given a meaning in an Indian Christian theology.

Another symbol of the Godhead which derives from the Vedas and manifests itself in different forms throughout Indian history is that of the Mother Goddess. It would seem to be an urgent task of an Indian Christian theology to integrate the feminine aspect of God in our Christian faith. A basis for such a theology is to be found in the Hebrew conception of Wisdom, which in the Old Testament is a feminine figure. In Catholic tradition this has been taken as a type of the Virgin Mary, but it is clear that it is a figure of the Godhead. Of this it is said: I came forth from the mouth of the Most High<sup>31</sup> and 'the Lord possessed me in the beginning of his ways, before his works of old. I was set up from everlasting from the beginning'.<sup>32</sup> And again: 'She is an effulgence from the everlasting light and an unspotted mirror of the working of God and an image of his goodness. She is a breath of the power of God and a clear effluence of the glory of the Almighty'.<sup>33</sup> When to this is added the fact that in Hebrew the word 'ruah' for Spirit is feminine and that in the Odes of Solomon and in the late syrian tradition the Holy Spirit is spoken of as our Mother, the case for asserting the feminine aspect of God and its appropriation to the Holy Spirit is very strong. In this way it would be possible to integrate in our faith and theology the profound understanding of God as Mother, which is one of the deepest intuitions of the Indian soul. The extreme devotion to the Virgin Mary in the Church in India is a sign of this deeply felt need in the Indian Christian.

### Avatar and Incarnation

The other great symbols of the Godhead in Hindu thought which need to be related to Christ in our theology are those of Rama and Kṛṣṇa. Both Rama and Kṛṣṇa are semi-historical

31. SIR 24. 3.

32. Pro. 3. 22 and 23.

33. Wis. 7. 25 and 26.

figures, but they derive from a mythological background. Mythology is the symbolic expression of the ultimate meaning and purpose of human existence as reflected in the archetypal figures of the unconscious. It derives therefore from an extremely deep level of human experience, which tends to remain constant over many generations. There can be no doubt that mythology remains an extremely potent force in modern India, with which any serious Christian theology needs to come to terms. These archetypal figures are present, in fact, in the unconscious of almost all Indians, and therefore all have a need to come to terms with them. Rama and Kṛṣṇa above all are the two figures that have impressed themselves indelibly on the Indian imagination. The danger of mythology is that it always tends towards fantasy, so as to become an escape from reality instead of being a confrontation with reality. But the genuine myth is a profound symbol of an existential experience of life itself, as it confronts a people in its actual human situation. When the myth becomes historical, as it is beginning to do in the stories of Rama and Kṛṣṇa, then we find the deepest expression of this existential human experience. Rama and Kṛṣṇa have become symbols of God in Man for a multitude of Hindus, for whom they signify the ultimate meaning of human existence.

For a Christian Jesus is the supreme symbol of sacrament of God in Man, the ultimate sign of the meaning of human existence. But Jesus is not a mythological figure but a unique historical Person. The *avatāra* belongs to the world of mythology, which is that of cyclic time, as Kṛṣṇa says in the Gita: 'Whenever righteousness declines and unrighteousness prevails, then I take birth'.<sup>34</sup> But in Israel, and this seems to have been unique in the ancient world, a conception of progressive time, of a movement towards an end, an 'eschaton' was developed, and Jesus enters this historical time as the one who is to bring it to its fulfilment. 'It was his purpose in the fullness of time to bring all things to a head in him'.<sup>35</sup> Jesus is the unique historic Person, whose death and resurrection mark the culmination of the history of a particular people, but at

34. B. G. 4. 7.

35. Eph. 1. 10.

the same time he is in his actual historic existence the symbol of the ultimate meaning and purpose of human existence. As such Jesus does not annul the significance of Rama or Kṛṣṇa or of any of the Hindu gods. They remain of permanent significance, giving a unique insight into Reality. A Christian does not therefore need to reject them but to relate them at their own proper level to the revelation of God in Christ. Revelation is of infinite richness and embraces all the manifestations of the divine in human history from the beginning of time.

### **Christian experience as communion of Persons**

A Christian mysticism, therefore, as an incarnational mysticism, will embrace the total manifestation of God both in the cosmos and in human history, and this total revelation will be seen to centre on the Person of Christ. But just as the Christian experience of God is an experience of Being in communion of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, so the Christian experience of the world and of humanity in Christ is an experience of an inter-communion of persons. In the Hindu experience the one Reality, the Brahman is seen to be the Self of the whole creation and of every human being, and this Self is recognised as a Person (*Puruṣa*), in whom all find fulfilment; but there is always a tendency to merge the individual being in the One Being and to lose the distinctive reality of the human person. But in the mystical Body of Christ each human person is in communion with the other persons and grows and actually achieves his full personality through this communion. Yet it must never be forgotten that these persons all exist in and through the one Person. They are persons within the Person of Christ. The human person is not complete in itself; it is made for communion with other persons and achieves its full personality only when it realises the One Person, who is present in every man. Contemplation consists in the transcendence of one's own separate personality and the discovery of the one Person that dwells in the cave of the heart, in whom alone each one of us finds fulfilment. In the end, as St. Augustine said, there is only one Christ loving himself - *unus Christus amans seipsum*.

Christian mysticism will therefore give to history and personality an importance that is often lacking in Hinduism.

This means that the Christian mystical experience which centres on the Person of Christ, both in his relations with the Father and the Holy Spirit in the Godhead, and in his relation with the persons who make up his mystical Body, will embrace all human history and the struggle of man to achieve full personality. Struggle and contemplation are the motto chosen by the Prior of Taizé for his Council of Youth. The world to-day is striving to attain a mere complete humanity to enable every man to realise his total personal being in a society which respects the human person. The human person is constituted by its experience both of physical reality in the world to which it belongs and of the social reality of the persons with whom it lives in communion. This whole world, therefore, of physical and social relationships is included in the sphere of Christian contemplation. Contemplation and mystical experience is not found in separation from the body and society, but in the transfiguration both of the body and of society, by which the total human being achieves its growth to full personal being, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,<sup>36</sup> as St. Paul described it. Perfect contemplation is attained therefore only through the struggle to achieve the total integration of the human personality in all its dimensions.

It need hardly be said that such a form of contemplation and mystical experience has nothing exclusively Christian about it. It is the common call of humanity to reach this maturity of personal being, and not only the Hindu but also the Humanist and the Marxist are engaged in the same struggle, though the goal is conceived in different ways and the means chosen to reach it are different. All humanity is engaged in this quest for personal fulfilment. Both the Hindu and the Christian traditions teach us that this fulfilment cannot be achieved merely on the physical or social plane, though it necessarily includes both. To find fulfilment man has to transcend himself, to discover a dimension of being beyond both the physical and the mental. Any theology worthy of the name, especially here, in India, must therefore be orientated towards this mystical dimension of reality, where the human person, both individual and social,

can find fulfilment, and where the physical world itself is transfigured and is no more subject to corruption and death. This is the world of the Resurrection, the 'new creation'<sup>37</sup> of St. Paul. It is also the City of Brahman of the Chandogya Upaniṣad, in which is found the 'small lotus of the heart'. In that lotus it is said there is a small space, in which are contained both heaven and earth. In it all desires are contained. It is the Self, free from sin, free from old age, free from death and grief and hunger and thirst, which desires nothing but what it ought to desire.. For those who depart hence after having discovered this Self, and those true desires, there is freedom in all the Worlds<sup>37</sup>.

Santhivanam

Bede Griffiths

Thannirpalli, Kulitalai

Tiruchy Dt

# Four Patterns of Theological Experience

Sri Sankaracarya commenting upon the Vedantic aphorism “*jaimādyasyayataḥ*, that from which the origin etc.”, says that with regard to the knowledge of Brahman even Scripture cannot be final since Brahman, an objective reality, can be attained only through experience. This may be a common characteristic of all theology, which is an ongoing communitarian reflection on Faith, which is basically an experience; in it experience has a certain primacy over Scripture, Tradition and particularly reasoning. But experience as applied to theological reflection has different dominant patterns both in the West and in the East. In this paper we shall briefly examine two experiential patterns that have dominated theological thought in the West and two that have formed the general framework of religious reflection in India.

## 1. Western understanding of theological experience

Perhaps the source of diversity and also of a certain amount of confusion in Christian theological thinking has been the different ways in which experience itself has been understood.

i. *Augustinian exemplarism*: For St. Augustine, St. Anselm and the whole Western tradition in general, faith experience is the model which intelligible theological discourse endeavours to approximate. So St. Augustine said, “I believe in order that I may understand” and St. Anselm made the point more explicit by defining theology as “faith seeking understanding”. For both, the divine intelligibility was the supreme light and model that made all understanding possible. Even though we do not and cannot contemplate the Supreme Intelligible directly, that Good “greater than which nothing can be” is the condition for our knowing anything. So when Anselm proposed his famous “Ontological Argument” to demonstrate the existence of God as the greatest Being than which nothing can be greater, he was appealing not to a mere idea of the greatest, but to that actual

greatest Being, who was presupposed as the condition of all knowing. Thus in the famous Medieval controversy about the Agent Intellect spoken of by Aristotle in his *De Anima* III, c. 5, when Avicenna postulated it as a separate common illuminating principle for all men, William of Auergne readily identified it with God himself, who according to the Augustinian current of thought, continuously illuminated the human mind through divine ideas. The Augustinian tradition represented by St. Bonaventure, and the Franciscan school with its mystical bent, did not undertake a research into the immanent character of the divine intervention in man.

But it emphasized what has always been and still remains the hallmark of Western theological apophatism or "limit-theology": All our theological discourse, which has to place together what are apparently opposite and contradictory, the finite and the infinite, good and limitation of good, is only a dialectical approximation to the ineffable reality of the divine. Even our most refined ideas and categories do not present God as he is, but represent only what we are capable of. For example when we say that there are three persons in one God, "person" represents the most perfect reality we can think of. The dialectical and the ever self-revising character of our concepts is what saves them from triviality. This negative and incomplete character of our thought in relation to the ineffable aspect of the divine reality it tries to attain, gained philosophical justification in the dialectical philosophy of Hegel and the process thought of Whitehead.

This exemplarist theological experience "affirms an intimate relation between God and the world, based on the Trinitarian nature of creation and on the Son as Image of the Father and as the divine mediating principle between the Father and the world, while remaining consubstantial with the Father".<sup>1</sup> This perspective has no difficulty in seeing the vestige and presence of the Word of God in every leaf and every grain of sand, and in viewing the unique Incarnation of the Son of God as the

1) Ewert H. Cousins. *Bonaventure and the Coincidence of Opposites*, Chicago Franciscan Herald Press, 1978 p. 251.

natural continuation and necessary fulfilment of God's action in creation: It is, in fact, in view of the future Incarnation of the Son of God that in the beginning God created the world. For it the whole theology was a discussion of God, first in Himself in His triune reality, then in His symbols, the creatures. But this Augustinian - Franciscan tradition did not investigate sufficiently wherein was the autonomy and identity of the human experience.

### ii. *St. Thomas Aquinas and oriental Christian apophatism*

But St. Thomas Aquinas, with St. Albert, John de Rochelle and others, realized that the Augustinian exemplarism and the postulated direct illumination by divine ideas seriously questioned the identity and autonomy of human experience. These thinkers boldly stated that the agent intellect, if there was one, as a human faculty is proper to each person. Against the statement of Augustine on : Cor. 12:3, that "No one can say externally unless God teaches internally"<sup>2</sup> St. Thomas appeals to the authority of St. John Damascene: "Each thing has its own activity: and everything that has its own activity is a cause of something".<sup>3</sup> Thus St. Thomas Aquinas was able to widen the Latin and Augustinian tradition through an appeal to the Eastern Fathers and writers like John Damascene, Pseudo Dionysius and the *Liber de Causis* of Proclus.

This approach to the truth of the Godhead that surpasses all human "faculty and exercise of discursive and intuitive reason", has three steps or stages. The first is one of affirmation attributing names to what in fact is Nameless, celebrating the Universal Cause with many titles drawn from the whole created universe, 'Good', 'Fair', 'Wise', 'Eternal', 'Existent', 'Creator of Ages', 'Giver of Life', 'Wisdom', 'Word', 'Ruler', and the like.<sup>4</sup> For the Good "while dwelling alone by Itself and having there firmly fixed its super-essential Ray, lovingly reveals Itself by

2) *De Magistro* cc. xi, xii nn. 38-40 PL 32, 1215-16.

3) *De Fide Orth.* II, c. 23 PG 94, 950; St. Thomas Aqu. *II S. d.* 28, q. 1, a 5, dis. 1, d 3; *In Boet. de Trinit.* q. 1, al dis. n. 2. *De Ver.* q. 11, a 1.

4) *De Div. Nom* I, nl.; I, 6.

illuminations corresponding to each separate creature's powers, and thus draws upwards holy minds into such contemplation, participation and resemblance of Itself as they can attain".<sup>5</sup> This consistence of finite rational beings in themselves with their own proper forms of being and activity, faculties distinct from their essence and activity, and the possibility of acquiring secondary perfection from their contact with the higher beings, especially God, were the central points of theological experience which St. Thomas established on the authority of Pseudo Dionysius and Aristotle, against the Augustinian tradition's concept of experience.

But this initial affirmative step has to be followed by an apophatic stage or a negative step for two reasons. Since all ideas of man are drawn from the material things which possess those perfections only in an imperfect way, they point to God by a sort of self-negation, representing Him "not as something of the same species or genus, but as the excelling principle of whose form the effects fall short".<sup>6</sup> Hence as St. John Damascene said, "Everything said of God signifies not His substance, but rather shows forth what He is not; or expresses some relation, or something flowing from His nature or operation".<sup>7</sup> According to St. Thomas, "in considering the divine substance we should especially make use of the method of remotion. For, by its immensity, the divine substance surpasses every form that our intellect reaches... We approach nearer to a knowledge of God according as through our intellect we are able to remove more and more things from Him".<sup>8</sup>

Secondly, even in the supernatural experience of Grace there is a certain break with what is natural and normal in the rational knowledge of man. As the Oriental Fathers in general and Ps. Dionysius in particular show by the analogy of the Sun, its rays and its light falling in the eye, the divine experience has a blinding effect on the human mind. One can never pass on to

5) *Ibid* I, 2

6) *Summa Theol.* I, 13, 2 c.

7) *De Fide Orth.* I, 9.

8) *Contr. Gent.* I, 14, 2.

an understanding of the supernatural experience by mere generalizations of the rational concepts derived from material things. Hence the only method of procedure possible is to start from the experience of the Godhead in faith and grace and contemplate through the eyes of God the procession of all beings from Him in their proper natures and see their return back to Him through their own activity aided by the divine power that leads all back to the Divine Centre. Thus the whole arrangement of the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas is according to this supernatural scheme. As E. Gilson remarks why many people fail to understand the first part of the *Summa* is because it implies and presupposes several things which are explained in the second part, namely, the return of creatures to God under the leadership of man imbued with grace.

## 2. Eastern approaches to religious reflection

Eastern religious thought in general has taken human experience more as an obstacle than a positive help in the realization of the absolute order of reality. The Vedic literature has consistently given expression to this embarrassment of human thought in finding itself blocked from proceeding to the higher realms of reality: "How can the boneless and invisible one support this bony and structured universe?"; "That which is one the poets have described in diverse ways"; "In the beginning there was neither existence nor non-existence; out of non-being being was born". In such words the Vedic man tried to express his bafflement concerning the relevance of this world for the experience of the really Real. The absolute and transcendent is actually immanent in this world of experience; but the phenomenal world hides it rather than reveals it. The only avenue to the transcendent open to man is his own consciousness, which expresses the absolute, universal and permanent order of reality as it is manifested in the temporal and transitory. Though man feels that he belongs to the higher order, he is located at the intersection of the universal and the particular, the infinite and the finite, the immutable and the changing, the sacred and the profane. The absolute order does not exist apart from, and outside

of, the temporal. Still, man is at least epistemologically, if not ontologically blocked from the realization of the higher, stuck in actuality in the area of the phenomenal, finite and profane order. Hence for the whole Indian religious tradition the crucial question of human salvation is one of liberation from bondage to the phenomenal, and of the removal of the finite from the face of the infinite. Liberation is, therefore, an activity around the phenomenal, not directly focussed on the Transcendent.

In this two approaches are possible: One can take a radically negative approach to the phenomenal experience and insist that only by its total removal can the transcendental be realized, or, one can give the finite experience a practical and symbolic value as pointing beyond itself to the Transcendent. Buddhism follows the former method while Hinduism generally conforms to the latter. Both these methods are clearly different from the two patterns indicated above in the Western thought and, therefore, present genuine Indian avenues to theology.

i. *Buddhist negative experience and theology.* Buddhist approach to life and reality is negative but it is not pessimistic. Buddha's historical quest for a solution to the problems of human life, sickness, old age and death, took him through rituals, asceticism and different absolutist forms of metaphysics to the final illumination under the Bodhi tree that life itself was suffering, and that craving implying ignorance, inborn tendencies, senses and sense contacts, led to re-birth, grasping and pain. It was compared to the poisonous arrow that threatened a man's life with its venomous injection and the fire that set a house ablaze. Hence the solution was not to investigate the nature of the arrow or of the poison, or of the fire, but immediately to take out the arrow, apply the antidote for the poison and put out the fire. The phenomenal experience is only a combination of factors, that should not be combined; they are together only by their conditional origin. When the conditions are removed they themselves will cease to be, leaving an emptiness that will be the authentic condition. Any attempt to imagine and construct the authentic in terms of the inauthentic, transitory and phenomenal, is by its very nature doomed to failure.

This was, to a certain extent, the approach also of the Samkhya school, which was the most ancient philosophical thought of India: The problem in human life is suffering and the root cause of it is *Prakṛti* or matter with its basic dynamic functions of reflection, action and limitation or individuality. The authentic condition cannot be imagined in terms of these different functions of matter, but should be postulated as a spiritual principle, *Puruṣa*, totally opposite in nature to matter. Though the evolutions and modifications of matter have an inner purpose, the education and self realization of *Puruṣa*, the process of liberation has to be a movement away from matter to attain the isolation or *kaivalya* of *Puruṣa* from matter.

This Buddhist Samkhya approach to religious liberation from the state of bondage presents us with a radical apophatism or negative theology that sees the theological experience not as an experience of the divine reality but as a process within the human psyche and within the phenomenal world of practical existence. The direct and primary scope of theology and religion is not to provide us with information concerning the world of the transcendental reality. Any such information can be only in the language of this phenomenal world and by its very nature is incapable of providing any direct experience of the Transcendent. Hence its primary scope is to set this world in order and to bring the conflicting functions of matter, that is, reflection, action and individuality, to balance each other. Once this balance is achieved matter will cease to be a distracting factor, and spirit will shine by its own inner light.

It is like playing a jigsaw puzzle: once the pieces are in place and the puzzle is solved, the player is satisfied and returns to himself. The details of our faith, God, creation, sin, divine incarnation, redemption, grace and sacraments are all parts of the puzzle that is human life. Discussion of God is not a search for an ontology of the absolute and transcendental reality, but a quest for the meaning of God for man. Creation is not an accounting of the act of the eternal in time but rather the search for the beginning of time, which cannot be in time itself. Sin is not an offence to God, who cannot really be offended, but a disaster of man. Divine Incarnation is not an event of God but

a special moment in human history which shows a special and personal irruption into it of the divine as its central and controlling factor. Its focus is not the divinity of the God-made-man, but the humanity of God. Redemption is bringing back humanity to its own focus. Sacraments and ritual present the material elements in their ideal harmonized form. This is why both Buddhism and Jainism placed great importance on religious art. The Yakṣis and the Yakṣas, the Bodhisattvas and Tirthakaras and especially the Buddha figures are expressions of great vigour and vitality, but at the same time have faces that reflect tranquillity and radiate an aura of peace.

Theology is not an adventure into the unknown land of the supernatural, but an "ek-perience" an excursion into the world to organize it and harmonize its elements so that man can withdraw into his own inner world of tranquillity and silence. As Nagarjuna explains at great length, origination, destruction, self-existence, other-existence, causation etc. are all conditions of the conditioned existence and therefore, have no absolute value, but are of meaning only within the practical experience of man. Only in the realization of their emptiness there is place for authenticity.

ii. *Pedagogical apophatism*: Hindu tradition, on the other hand, especially the Vedanta school takes a positive view of phenomenal experience. All experience is a manifestation of consciousness, and hence what is positive in temporal and phenomenal experience is the presence of the one transcendental absolute, the One without a second, in all manifestations of consciousness. But the particular is not a mere reflection or shadow of the absolute. The particular and time space bound phenomenal existence adds name and form, individuality and specific nature. Hence the real religious problem for the whole Vedanta school is the contradiction and contrast between the areas of the subject and the object, the fields of the I and the non-I. The obvious conclusion is that authenticity can be attained only in the sphere of I-consciousness.

In proceeding from the phenomenal experience to the realization of the absolute a certain negative discrimination

is needed: The world of phenomenal experience including religious worship and Scriptures is characterised by *neti neti*, not so, not so; they tell us that the ultimate Reality is not in their sphere, they only constitute the world of *a-vidya*, non-knowledge and *māyā*, things created by will and imagination, really unreal, something like a dream, mirage or illusion. Still, they cannot be denied completely in the Buddhist fashion and authentic experience is not their total disappearance or emptiness. Phenomenal experience is not nothing, but has a relative value pointing beyond itself to the transcendental, pure consciousness. The world of phenomenal experience does not add anything to the absolute reality; but has the specific value of being the Lord's *līla* or sport, which is actually His self-expression and self-manifestation. To this world of divine sport belong also the religious truths, which though they are about the transcendental reality, are, nevertheless, facts, events and conceptions of man.

In this perspective theological experience is an essentially human phenomenon embracing several levels of consciousness. It starts with the psychological dynamism of intense desire to arrive at an adequate knowledge of the Divine, bases itself on the symbolic value of everything finite and particular as pointing towards the infinite and incomprehensible, recognizes the presence of the supreme Word and ultimate meaning in the irruption of the Divine into human historical existence and realizes the convergence of all experience in the one ultimate reality of God. Theology is not a detached and abstract science constituting an independent system of concepts and statements like physics or sociology. It is the expression of faith experience which is the intensely personal desire to move from what is seen as if in a mirror and as an enigma to a direct vision of the things we hope for in eternal life. Though the eye has not seen, the ear has not heard and the human mind has not grasped what is reserved for man in future life, the eye of faith has already a certain foretaste of it and the theological experience is the endeavour to stretch that initial taste into full realization. Hence religious reflection and theology are an extension of the total commitment of oneself to the Transcendent in

faith, and faith itself as a human psychological phenomenon cannot exist without a certain amount of conscious theological reflection.

In this desire of the believing mind to arrive at a full realization of its ultimate object, the particular concepts, statements, as well as the individual objects of experience have a mediating function. In themselves they have no independent and absolute meaning. They point to the infinite Reality as that from which they derive their origin and which forms the support and ground of their continued existence as well as their final goal. In this symbolic value of all things to point towards the incomprehensible reality of God, the Incarnation and the supernatural order of things have a unique role to play: They bring man to a face to face encounter with the personality of the Son of God and His Spirit leading us to the Father. Natural things can point to the absolute reality of God and at best indicate that He is not an impersonal force but personal or supra-personal. But it is God's entry into human history in the Incarnation that discloses the unique reality of the three divine Persons. Even though the historical event of the Incarnation is part and parcel of the phenomenal world, the one who discloses himself in that event is the Son of God himself.

In this perspective Scripture itself gets a new meaning. It is not merely a book of information about God, the words of God in the words of man, but it presents the Word itself, the truly divine meaning of human existence, God's invitation to man to share in the divine life. What is set forth in the Bible is what was experienced concerning the personal self-disclosure of God by people inspired by the Spirit of God'. It also shows how the Word of God was realized in the historical events, especially in the humanity of God in Jesus Christ.

### **Conclusion**

The four patterns of religious experience examined in this article were taken not for their religious content but for the different psychological approaches they present towards the supernatural reality. Augustinian exemplarism takes man's approach to the supernatural as a continued illumination of the

human mind by the supreme light of God, while Thomistic humanism views it as an elevation of the human faculties towards the attainment of the supernatural goal. In contrast, the Buddhist negativism will view all human religious experience a process within the phenomenal world to eliminate the obstacle to liberation by harmonizing it as a system within itself hiding the real rather than revealing it. The Vedantic pattern harmonizes the different levels of human consciousness, psychological desire, aesthetic symbolism and metaphysical meaning, all deriving their value from the one unique consciousness of God and leading man towards the final realization of that one pure consciousness as embracing all. It is this fourth pattern of experience that an Indian theology has to further investigate as a unique Indian contribution towards theological development.

Fordham University  
U. S. A.

John B. Chethimattam

# Mysticism - Christian and Hindu

## (with Special Reference to Dionysius and Sankara)

### Introduction

The Western theological *weltanschauung* is more anthropomorphic than cosmic, thanks to the predominantly analytical bent of the western mind. From time immemorial the oriental thinker exhibited a synthetic bent of mind in his theological speculations. But even in purely empirical sciences, the Hindu could cut deeper than his occidental counterpart. The Western philosophical speculation is based on the principle enunciated by the Greek thinker Protagoras: "Man is the measure of all things - *panton krematon metron anthropos*." Socrates re-echoes the same thought when he says: "The noblest of all studies is what man should be and what he should pursue."<sup>1</sup> In this context Dr. Radhakrishnan says: "Intellect is subordinate to intuition, dogma to experience, outer expression to inward realization".<sup>2</sup> The Prophetic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) are essentially credal religions. Creeds require intellectual assent. Hence we get conceptualistic formulations and definitions. In Hinduism, conceptualizations are not the finality - *terminus ad quem* - but the starting point - *terminus a quo*. Propositions have just a functional value, to use the language of John Dewey. According to Advaita, *śruti* is itself to be finally superseded or cancelled. The *Kena Upaniṣad* says: "There the eye goes not, speech goes not, nor mind, we know not, we understand not, how one would teach it?"<sup>3</sup>. The Orientals in general come face to face with truth and grasp it almost by intuition. Says Dr. Radhakrishnan: "The Western mind is rationalistic and ethical, positivistic and practical, while the Eastern mind is inclined to

---

1. Plato, *Gorgias*

2. Radhakrishnan S, *The Hindu View of Life*, London, Unwin, 1969 p. 15

3. *Kena Upanisad*.

inward life and intuitive thinking<sup>4</sup>. Intellect seeks to congeal the flowing stream in blocks of ice. Truth is something that is lived and not merely logically comprehended. Logic tends to reduce everything to identity. The Greeks, with all their acuteness and skill, had little real religious instinct. In this respect, the more practical West and the more mystical East have always diverged<sup>5</sup>.

In the Western religions there is an anxiety for definition and form. The Greek mind is not satisfied with the conception of the Supreme Being as a spiritual reality, but must invest it with concrete forms. The anthropomorphism of the Greek mind has been more dominating over their religion than any thought pattern. The great insistence on the personality of God in the Christian religion is a legacy from Greek anthropomorphism<sup>6</sup>. Augustine accepted this term most unwillingly and used it, "not as though that meant really saying something worth-while, but simply so as not to say nothing at all"<sup>7</sup>. When the Greek dialecticians and the Roman lawyers succeeded to the Jewish divines and Prophets, Christian theology became logical in form and one based on law. According to Dr. Hatch, the Greek influence on Christianity showed itself mainly in three ways: the first of them was the tendency to define. The earliest Christians did not throw any fence of words round their idea of God: they called Him 'Father', 'Lord', etc. The second was the tendency to speculate, that is, to draw inferences from definitions, to weave the inferences into systems and to test assertions by their logical consistency or inconsistency with those systems. Thirdly, the upholding of approved definitions was elevated to a position superior to actual knowledge and love of God and the effort to lead a holy life<sup>8</sup>. But it must be conceded that the cosmic out-

4. Radhakrishnan S, *East and West in Religion*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1933, p. 48

5. Cook Stanley, "Jesus Christ", in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 14th ed., 1929.

6. Farnell, *Greece and Babylon*, p. 11

7. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, V, 9, 10.

8. Hatch, *Fluence of Greek Ideas On the Christian Faith*, pp. 135-37.

look was not entirely absent from the Greek scene, especially in the pre-Sophistic thinkers. But we can clearly discern a radical antithesis between a cosmic *weltanschauung* and a narrow anthropomorphic outlook in contemporary Greek drama. Contrast, for instance, the two dramas of Sophocles: *Oedipus Basileus* and *Oedipus in Colonus*. Historically speaking, it was the Sophists of Greece who first made use of the rational method. Socrates is credited with starting the Dialectical method which was fully developed by his illustrious pupil Plato in his famous Dialogues. Aristotle founded the science of Logic in the West. He especially developed the Syllogism, the best instrument of analytical thinking. Aquinas' method of deducing theological conclusions from revealed truths, is a further development of the Aristotelian analytics. But Aquinas made reason subservient to faith. Modern European philosophy made a swing back to pure rationalism, beginning with Francis Bacon. Metaphysics had to yield ground to Epistemology. Soon there set in a reaction against excessive rationalism which took various forms. Pascal and Kierkegaard opened up the way for Existentialism. Kantianism was a reaction in favour of Practical Wisdom, while anti-rationalistic mysticism was sponsored by Meister Eckhart and the school of St. Victor. These thinkers argued that the rational method gives us only a symbolic view of reality. Frank Thilly says: "The rational method, on account of its limitations, studies reality piecemeal and so can never put us in direct touch with reality. At best, it gives us second-hand knowledge"<sup>9</sup>.

Contemplation of reality, not discrimination in a rational order, is the culmination of Indian philosophy. It means the survey of, the looking along, all things, all existent facts<sup>10</sup>. Now, it is a law of life that religions, like all things, take on the nature of the organism which assimilate them<sup>11</sup>. Both topology and climatology played a considerable role in giving to the Indian mind a cosmic outlook and a mystical temperament. Torrential

9. Thilly, *A History of Philosophy*, Allahabad, 1965, pp. 577-79.

10. Heimann Betty, *Indian And Western Philosophy*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1937, pp. 27 ff.

11. Radhakrishnan S, *op. cit.*, p. 11

rains, cataclismic floods, the enervating tropical heat, the sooth-ing shades of the mighty forests and the fertilizing Sindhu-Ganga river-systems, produced in the early Hindu thinkers, what Rudolf Otto calls the basic religious instinct in man - a sense of the 'Holy', an awareness of a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*<sup>12</sup>. The Vedic sages evinced a reverential and worshipful attitude to Nature. This is the beginning of Indian mysticism. R. C. Zaehner calls it 'Natural Mysticism'. The early European settlers in Canada looked upon the mighty forests with a commercial eye. But, for the early Aryan settlers in India the mighty forests were the cathedrals of worship. In this context, Tagore says: "The earth, water and light, fruits and flowers were for the Indians, not merely physical phenomena to be turned to use and then left aside. They were necessary to them for the attainment of the ideal of perfection"<sup>13</sup>. In another passage Tagore continues: "The language of harmony in Nature is the mother tongue of our lone soul"<sup>14</sup>. We can also profitably compare the poetry of Tagore with those of Blake and Wordsworth. For in the western temperate zone man had to adopt a different attitude towards Nature: he had to conquer and modify Nature to suit his physical and economic needs. The contrasting cultures of the West and India are closely adapted to their specific natural conditions. Hence, the belief that the Western culture is destined to evolve into a world culture is just a chimera. Kipling had said long ago:

Oh, East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet; Till earth and sky stand presently at God's great judgement seat.

The poet has taken an extreme position: we may, on the contrary, agree with the commonly accepted view that the East and the West are the alternate beats of the same human heart, as Tagore has put it so beautifully. There could not be any contradiction between the East and the West; at the most, there is

12. Otto R., *The Idea Of the Holy*, New York: O. U. P., 1958, p.

13. Tagore, *Sadhana*, Madras: Macmillan & Co.

14. Tagore, *Creative Activity*.

only an antinomy which is capable of solution in a trans-logical plane<sup>15</sup>.

## I. The Mysticism of Dionysius

### Introduction

Ancient Egypt was the twilight region between the East and the West. It was not only a commercial emporium, but also an intellectual rendezvous where Oriental and Occidental thoughts met and exchanged. We know from Asoka's inscriptions that Indian missions were sent to the court of the Seleucidae in Antioch and to the court of the Ptolemies in Alexandria. During his sojourn in Egypt, Plato had ample opportunities to come into contact with Hindu thought. Neo-Platonism shows close affinity to Hindu thought. The Oxford scholar C. E. Rolt suggests that it might be due to the fact that Plotinus, the greatest of the Neo-Platonists, had undertaken a journey to the Punjab.<sup>16</sup>

Pseudo-Dionysius, a close follower of the Neo-Platonist philosopher Proclus, might equally have been influenced by Hindu thought, because he studied literature and rhetoric in Alexandria, the cosmopolitan seat of learning in those days. We know next to nothing about the biographical facts of Dionysius, the father and founder of Christian mysticism. Dean Inge says: "The date and nationality of Dionysius are still matters of dispute".<sup>17</sup> Harnack places him in the second half of the fourth century.<sup>18</sup> The writings of Dionysius are quoted not much later than 500 A. D. Severus, the Patriarch of Constantinople, was the first to quote him in a Council. The Pseudo-Dionysius was probably a Syrian monk. He assumed the pseudonym 'Dionysius' to pass off as the Athenian convert of St. Paul. But his Neo-Platonism soon betrayed him, especially his Proclian doctrines and theories. He sticks closer to Proclus.

15. Cuttat, J. A., *The Encounter of Religions*, New York: Desclée, 1960.

16. Rolt C. E., *Dionysius The Areopagite*, tr., London, S. P. C. K., New ed., 1940, Introduction.

17. Inge W. R., *Christian Mysticism*, London, Methuen, 1948 p. 104.

18. Harnack, *Dogmatic Theology*, Vol. IV, pp. 282-83.

than to Plotinus. Thus, he agrees with Imablicus and Proclus (in opposition to Plotinus) that the 'One' is exalted above Goodness. In this, of all Neo-Platonists, the Areopagite comes closer to Advaitic thought. Dean Inge says: "Dionysius is a theologian, not a visionary like his master Hierotheus. His main object is to present Christianity in the guise of a Platonic Mysteriosophy and he uses the technical terms of the Mysteries whenever he can".<sup>19</sup> His philosophy is that of his day: Neo-Platonism, with its strong Oriental affinities.

### Methodology of Dionysius

Like the Upaniṣadic seers, the Areopagite clearly saw that conceptualistic thought was inadequate to reach the Absolute. Says he: "Liberated from the world of the senses and intellect, the soul enters into the mysterious darkness of a holy ignorance (*agnosia*) and renouncing all scientific thought, loses itself in Him, Who can be neither seen nor understood, united to the Unknown in its highest part because of its renunciation of knowledge".<sup>20</sup> The 'Super-Essence', as Dionysius calls the Absolute, is beyond all names and forms *nāma* and *rūpa*. Says the Areopagite: "Of Him there is neither name nor can one be found for Him".<sup>21</sup> He further says: "No monad or triad can express the all-transcending hiddenness of the all transcending superessentially supereexisting Super-Deity".<sup>22</sup> He calls it the Absolute Nothing, which is above all existence. The Absolute of the Areopagite embraces all Reality like the Brahman of Sankara, to the exclusion only of absolute nothingness, or *atyantabhava*. The plenitude of this reality in a Christian thinker has so overwhelmed even such a great scholar as Dean Inge that he accuses the Areopagite of Madhyamika influence in his severe judgement: "This pantheistic absurdity shows what we are driven to if we try to graft Indian Nihilism upon the Platonic doctrine of Ideas".

19. Inge W. R., *Christian Mysticism*, London: Methuen, 1948, p. 105.

20. Dionysius, *Mystical Theology*, London, S. P. C. K., 1940, 1. 3.

21. Dionysius, *De Divinis Nominibus*, I.

22. Dionysius, *De Divinis Nominibus*, p. 106

About the ineffability and incomprehensibility of the Absolute, the Areopagite is in perfect agreement with the Upaniṣadic thinkers. The ‘ecstasy’ of Dionysius is a going forth from being as such, while that of Plotinus is rather a reduction of being to absolute simplicity. Thus, Dionysius goes far beyond Neo-Platonism when he says that God is neither One nor Unity.<sup>23</sup> In other words, God transcends the antinomy of one-many. In this context Ratzinger says: God stands above singular and plural; he bursts both these categories”.<sup>24</sup> The Areopagite’s methodology consists in “a going forth from the realm of created things”. This is also the method of Sankara. The term ‘One’ is used by Neo-Platonists, including the Areopagite, in an attempt to utter what appears to be its most significant feature; this is an inadequate way of saying what would be more accurately expressed by such unintelligible terms as, ‘That which is more unified than one’. Sankara himself preferred to use the term *A-dvaitam* rather than *Ekam*. In his methodology, Dionysius begins by investing the Absolute with human categories *nama* and *rupa*, and concepts like causality. The symbolic theology is the discarding of materiality from the Godhead and evoking the significant. But, Apophatic theology still uses intellectualization, consisting in the successive negation of the Divine names, affirmed by the Cataphatic method. The Cataphatic theology as expounded in the *De Divinis Nominibus*, ends with such affirmations about the Godhead as ‘Creator’, ‘Lord’, etc. This is reminiscent of the first stage in Advaita where the *Saguṇa* aspect of Brahman as *Īśvara* is considered to be sublated later at the *Nirguṇa* level. The apophatic method rescues theology from all anthropomorphism and it ends up with the negation that God is. It is, however, not the Nihilism of the Madhyamikas. What is denied here is the ‘reality’ as applied to the empirical beings. For Dionysius all symbols such as ‘being’ and ‘non-being’ should be excluded from the Absolute. That is why he says like the seers of the Upaniṣads: God is neither being nor non-being. Unlike the Platonists, Dionysius

23. Dionysius, *P. G.*, III, 1048-A

24. Ratzinger J., *Introduction to Christianity*, London: Search Press, 1971, p. 128

does not stop short at the conclusion of the apophatic theology. He, therefore, like the Advaitins, introduces the term, 'Super-Being' or 'Super-Personality', which is neither being nor non-being, but transcends both. It is so real that it cannot be the object of knowledge. It is only a subject, nay, the only subject. Thus, Dionysius agrees with the thought of Sankara that in the Absolute there is no subject-object polarity. In this assertion, Dionysius is a pioneer in Christian thought, going far beyond the Cappadocian Fathers. He clearly states that God cannot be an object of knowledge.<sup>25</sup> Rolt maintains that the Areopagite clearly taught that God is just the appearance of the 'Super-Essence'.<sup>26</sup> The Areopagite says that at the final stage of the mystical experience, the distinction between the 'this' and the 'that' vanishes. In this context we may quote Ruysbroeck, a close follower of Dionysius: "To such men it is revealed that they 'are' what they contemplate".<sup>27</sup> This is to be assimilated to the Vedantic dictum: *Tat tvam asi*. The theology of Sankara, and Dionysius may be said to have a two-tier view of reality: that of Reality and its appearance. It is similar to the view of Proclus who admits only 'relatives' in the world which await reversion to the one.<sup>28</sup>

### **Creation in Dionysius**

The ultimate Godhead, brimful with its super-unity, must overflow into multiplicity, must pass from indifference into differentiations and relationships, and dwell in a region where there is nothing outside of itself, yet, on another side of its nature, so to speak, touch and embrace a region of differentiations and relationships. So, in a sense, it is related to that region and belongs to it. Ultimately, however, the Godhead is unrelated. But in its eternal, created activity, it is manifested under the form of differentiation and relationship. It belongs concurrently to two worlds: that of Ultimate Reality and that of Manifested

25. Dionysius. *P. G.*, III, 1048-A, 15, B-1.

26. Rolt C. E., *Dionysius the Areopagite*, London, S. P. C. K., 1940, p. 7

27. Rolt C. E., *Dionysius the Areopagite* London, S. P. C. K., 1940, p. 27

28. Proclus, *In parmenide n.*, III 225

Appearance. Here we have a perfect parallel in the doctrines of Sankara regarding the *Saguṇa Brahman* and the *Nirguṇa Brahman*. Therefore, there is not only the possibility of creation but also of revelation. Hence all the Scriptural names of God, including that of 'God', cannot express the Ultimate Nature, its Super-Essence, but only its manifested appearance in its creative activity or relative activity. Dionysius definitely teaches that doctrine, which when revived independently in recent years by Bradley, was regarded as a startling blasphemy, that God is but an appearance of the Reality. And this is, after all, a bold way of stating that orthodox truism that the ultimate Reality is incomprehensible, a truism which Christian theology accepts as an axiom and then is prone to ignore.

The various names of God are, thus inadequate symbols of that which transcends all thought and existence. But they are undifferentiated titles because they are symbols which seek, though unsuccessfully, to express the undifferentiated Super-Essence. Though the terms, 'God', 'Good', 'Existent', etc., have all different connotations, yet they all denote the same undifferentiated Reality. The whole manifested Godhead is 'God', 'Creator', etc. The absolute Godhead is the 'Super-Essence'; the eternally manifested Godhead is the Blessed Trinity. Dionysius accepts the eternal manifestation of the Trinity because it is revealed. The eternal distinctions of the Trinity is for him dogma. But on the other hand, Dionysius the philosopher, believes that these distinctions of the three Persons belong to the level of manifestation, for otherwise they could not be revealed.

Dionysius does not concede full-fledged reality to the phenomenal world. At the same time, they are also not non-existent. Thus, like Sankara, the Areopagite avoids the extremes of Realism and Nihilism. Though he speaks of the emanations of the Godhead, in the ultimate analysis, they are non-existent. He calls them the universal and particular streams of emanations. They are not, however, something other than the Super-Essence. They are simply distant aspects of it. They are the Super-Essence in its creative activity. This theory compares favourably with Sankara's teaching on creation. Both teach forms of *Satkaryavada*. The creation theory of the Areopagite should be assimilated to the *Vivarta vada* of the Advaitins. In fact, Dionysius

uses the same analogies as the Upaniṣads. Thus, he compares creation to the water flowing from a lake in the form of a river, which is not different from the lake itself.

### Contemplation

The method of Self-realization is the same in Sankara and in Dionysius. By contemplating on the true nature of the self, one reaches or realizes the Self. Disentangling oneself from the outside world, one goes to the very centre of one's being. Thus, one gradually becomes unified and simplified. This process is called *Via Negativa* by Dionysius. Man's first and rudimentary notion of the deity was highly anthropomorphic. God was conceived as an external being, an object like any phenomenal object. By the negative way, we cast aside the materialistic aspects of God and also the aspect of change. The Absolute is now considered immaterial and immutable. But here we attribute personality to God. This is the field of discursive reason. Indian thought always took the term, 'person' in its primitive meaning of *mask* (Latin: *personare*) and compares it to *rupa* or transitory form. Current Western thinking on 'Person' has travelled a long way from Aristotle and Aquinas.<sup>29</sup> Casting aside this notion of God as Person, we employ the intuitive faculty to arrive at a purer notion of God. Intuition penetrates beyond the world of multiplicity and arrives at a Reality that is absolute Unity without any relation and distinction. But here there is still the polarity of the individual and the One Reality. This also must be transcended. The human self must go forth out of itself into the Second-less (*a-dvaita*) Reality. Finite self-hood is eased away and one realizes one's identity with the Super-Essence. This is also the conclusion of Sankara. For Sankara *mukti* or liberation consists in the elimination of change and multiplicity and the final realization of the Second-less (*a-dvaita*) Self. Any theology that is tied down to being is alien to both Advaita and Dionysian mysticism. Thus modern Western Existential theology is a far cry from Hindu and Eastern Christian thought. J. B. Metz in his foreword to Rahner's 'Spirit in the World' seemingly approves of Rahner's anthropocentrically

---

29. Copleston F. *Contemporary Philosophy*, London: Search Press, 1973 reprint, pp. 103 ff.

oriented theology.<sup>30</sup> Rahner's fundamental thesis in this book is the convertibility of being and intelligibility. It is criticised by some as ultimately leading to Idealism. Balthasar, for example, criticises Rahner for his anthropological and subjectivistic reduction of theology. The Existential theology of Rahner stresses the ontological and theological relevance of the problems of historicity and *facticity*. But both Sankara's and the Areopagite's thought devalues historicity and *facticity*. From the point of view of the Absolute, history has no reality.

### The problem of evil

Evil entered the world through human will. Good always exists while evil exists only when it is practised.<sup>31</sup> Being God's image, man naturally should have ascended to God. But he failed due to his free choice. Three barriers now separated him from God: death, sin, nature. Christ broke these three barriers by His descent: He overcame nature by His Incarnation, sin by His death and death by His Resurrection. For Maximus, Incarnation and deification (*sarkosis, theosis*) correspond to one another. The East has a holistic view of Christ. Its Liturgy does not separate the Passion theme from the Resurrection theme. This will be more appealing to the Indian religions than the Latins over-emphasis on the suffering Christ. For the Buddhist philosopher Suzuki, "the crucified Christ is a terrible sight". Asks Suzuki: "That Christ died vertically on the cross whereas the Buddha passed away horizontally (lying between two Bodhi trees) – does this not symbolize the fundamental difference between Buddhism and Christianity?"<sup>32</sup> Indian theological methodology should give more importance to the doctrine of the Incarnation than to that of the Redemption. It has some analogy to the Hindu doctrine of *Avataras*.<sup>33</sup>

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity is better explained by the Eastern tradition than that of the West. This is also

30. Ranher K. *Spirit in the World*, tr., London: Sheed & Ward, 1968, p. xxxiii.

31. Diadochus, *Ascetic Treatise*, ch. 3

32. Suzuki D. T., *Mysticism Christian And Buddhist*, London: Allen & Unwin,

33. Nazianzen G., *Oratio*, XLV, 22

more in accordance with Vedantic thought. According to Eastern theology the Father and the Spirit remain unmanifested. Christ is the image of the invisible unknowable Father. The Spirit has no image. So His person too is invisible. St. Simeon the New Theologian has a beautiful hymn to the Spirit, the unknowable one.<sup>34</sup> Christ's work is centred on man's nature which He recapitulates whereas the work of the Spirit concerns man's person that He sanctifies. Thus, the work of Christ unifies while the work of the Spirit diversifies. In the *kenosis* (emptying) of the Son His Person appeared in its fulness while the Divine Nature remained hidden under the form of a slave. But in the *kenosis* of the Spirit His Person remained hidden while the Divine Nature was fully manifested.

### **Eastern Christian spirituality**

Self-realization (*theosis*) of the individual is the goal of man. This *theosis* will be realized fully only in the next world. Synergy or union of man's will with that of God is the condition for deification. The East never viewed grace and free will separately. According to Gregory of Nyssa both are two poles of the same reality.<sup>35</sup>

For the Christian East, the heart (*kardia*) is the source intellectual and spiritual activity. The spirit, *pneuma*, or *nous* is the contemplative faculty. Man must live according to the spirit; his whole complex must be spiritual or *pneumatikos*. The heart is to be purified by the descent of the spirit. Without the heart the spirit is powerless; and without the spirit, the heart is blind. Hence, we have a two fold spiritual task: action (*praxis*) and contemplation (*theoria*). According to Maximus, action without contemplation is mere fancy, and action without contemplation is sterile.<sup>36</sup> St. Isaac the Syrian says: "It is purity of heart that gives integrity to the contemplation of the spirit".<sup>37</sup> According

34. Cf. P. G., CXX 507-9

35. Nyssa Gregory St., *De Instituto Christiano*, 1. G., XLVI, 286-C

36. Maximus Confessor, *Capita*, Cap. 88

37. Isaac St. (Syrian), *Theotoki*, XVII, pp. 87-88

to Evagrius, by active life (*praxis*) a man may finally attain to a state of impassibility (*apatheia*) and passionlessness.<sup>38</sup>

*Mystical Union*: St. Isaac the Syrian distinguishes three degrees in the mystical union. The first is repentance. It is a permanent state of conversion to God. It is a change of mind - *metanoia*, a continuous exodus from ourselves. But according to Evagrius, there is a danger of penance itself becoming a passion and a hindrance to the spiritual life. The aim of *japa* (invocation of the name of God) is to achieve a state of passionlessness.

Contemplation or word-less prayer is the second stage. Palamas defines prayer, "as a bond connecting rational creatures with their Creator".<sup>39</sup> In pure prayer, there is no petition. With it *praxis* ceases and we enter *theoria*. There is perfect 'synergy' or harmony between human and divine wills. At a certain level, when one leaves the psychic realm, in which the spirit (*nous*) is active, even prayer itself ceases. This is contemplation or *samadhi*.<sup>40</sup>

*Hesichasm*: Mystical experience is possible only in and through prayer. Prayer must be so continuous and uninterrupted as to make the heart saturated with God-consciousness. In Eastern spirituality this is achieved by the *Hesichas*, Prayer or the Prayer of the Heart. It consists in introducing the Name of Jesus into one's heart with the rhythm of breathing. The classical Hesichast formula is: "O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner".<sup>41</sup> Its aim is the same as that of *Yoga*: to prevent the flow of mental modes: *Yogah cittavritti nirodhah*. Both Sankara and Evagrius caution us not to superimpose images on the Absolute while we are engaged in Self-realization. "The beginning of error", says Evagrius, "is the vanity of the mind.. . which tries to circumscribe the divine in forms and shapes".<sup>42</sup> An ancient Sanskrit text says:

38. Evagrius Ponticus, *Capita Practica*, LXXI

39. Palamas G., P.G., CL, 1117-B

40. Isaac the Syrian, *Theotoki*, pp. 206-7

41. Theophanes, *Correspondence* (Russian) Vol. V., No. 911

42. Evagrius Ponticus, *De Oratione*, ch. 114-16

Prathama pratima puja  
 Japastotrani madhyama  
 Uttamo manasi puja  
 Soham pujottamottama

(Image worship is the first, muttering of mantras and chanting of hymns are middle course; higher is mental worship and the highest is the worship of the form: 'I am He').

In Eastern Christian theology there is no dichotomy between love and knowledge (*gnosis*). Without true *gnosis* our union with God will be, "an illusory discipline", says St. Macarius of Egypt. In the higher stages of the mystical way, spiritual life is revealed as perfect knowledge of God - the *jñana marga* of Advaita. Both Eastern Christian theology and Advaita describe the Absolute as Self-luminosity. *Gnosis* is an experience of God's uncreated light. The East has no Manichean contempt for man's bodily nature. Even here below man's purified body shares in the God experience. While the dark night of Gethsemane is the paradigm of Western spirituality, the light of the Transfiguration is the paradigm of Eastern spirituality. Eastern theology always straining for greater fulness, refuses to view the Godhead as an essence locked within itself. He overflows His essence. Hence, the isolated cult of the Humanity of Christ is foreign to the Eastern tradition, which looks for fulness. Christ's humanity is always to be joined to His divinity and in glorious form.

## II. Sankara's Mysticism

### Introduction

The first of the four qualifications laid down by Sankara for the study of *Vedanta* is, "the capacity to discriminate between eternal and impermanent realities" - *nityanityavastuviveka*.<sup>43</sup> Sankara's distinction between the primary and the secondary meanings of words is the key to his thought.<sup>44</sup> Applying this key distinction to metaphysics, Sankara asserts that the phenomenal world has only a pragmatic reality, *vyavaharika satya*,

43. Sankara, Introduction to: "*Sutra Bhasya*"

44. De Smet R., *Religious Hinduism*, Allahabad, 1968, p. 54

while Brahman alone is supreme reality *paramarthika satya*. The goal of Advaita is Self-realization and the means adopted by Sankara is the way of knowledge *jñana marga*. This self-realization, however, will not arise as long as one identifies oneself with the psycho-physical organism, under the influence of the cosmic ignorance known as *Avidya*. Hence, a correct evaluation of the world is the pre-requisite for Brahman-knowledge. Once we realize that the world is unreal from the point of view of the absolute, we will not attach ourselves to the world of names and forms, *nama -rupa*.

### Three paradigms for the understanding of advaita:

#### 1. Sanskrit root - a key to Vedanta

Western logical terms (*termini*) are individual closed circles. They are border-lines of distinction which may touch one another. But each term retains its own distinct contours. Indian Grammarians, on the other hand, were reluctant to fix a term to one possible meaning only. The productive verbal root is kept elastic enough to assume different meanings according to the context, schools of thought, or branches of knowledge. In other words, Indian terminology is built from within. Like nuclei they grow from the centre to the periphery, extending ever farther in expansion. The verbal root radiates into divergent spheres of application with a wealth of prefixes. This linguistic decentralisation has its overtones in Indian philosophical, theological and political thought. The verbal root expands indefinitely with ever newer borderland meanings. Indian thought expands from an intensive nucleus into unlimited forms of growth and uncertain periphery. The Sanskrit verbal root is immutable but it is susceptible of taking infinite shades of meanings. This root is comparable to *Brahman*, the Supreme Being, whose infinite transitory manifestations are the gods - His names and forms (*nama-rupa*). Hindu gods are not personal incarnations (as in Christianity) but ideas incarnate, that is, divine attributes. The *Rg Veda* says: "Ekam sad vipra bahudha vadanti" (That which is, is one; sages describe it in manifold ways). The *Darśanas* are not opposing systems of thought but theological points of view that encircle the for-ever elusive centre of creative divinity. Personalistic theism is just one point of view of the Infinite.

According to the Upaniṣads, theism is only a means to attain the Supra-personal Brahman. As long as a person, even the lofty personality of the god Prajapati is assumed, the Absolute is not reached.<sup>45</sup> Betty Heimann says: "India definitely postulates the operation of supra-personal laws and processes".<sup>46</sup> Monotheism is defective for the Vedantins since it is linked with empirical measurement, the number One. Betty Heimann calls Vedantic thought by the term 'Supra-Theism'.<sup>47</sup> It is this tradition that Sankara developed. In order to safeguard Brahman's transcendence, Advaita Vedanta does not assign personality to the Absolute. The West devalues the neuter gender. It stands for dead matter. For Vedanta the neuter is superior to the masculine and feminine genders. According to Heimann, Indian mystics are epistemological saints and not martyrs. They reach the Absolute by an epistemological process of gradual elimination of the phenomenal reality by means of reasoning. The 'I-Thou' relationship (fundamental for monotheistic religions) is not final for Advaita; they are only steps towards the final goal of the 'It-experience'. The nobler neuter person is used to indicate the Absolute. For Aristotle, the 'other' *to heteron* is neuter and it is a devalued term. For the West *Person* and *Individuality* are higher values. *Param*, the Sanskrit counterpart of *to heteron*, is a vague term. It does not necessarily stand for personality. Nay, in its highest denotation it stands for the Supra-Personal Absolute. According to Vedantic tradition, whatever has name and form is not the Absolute. Here, even the highest personal gods like Śiva, Viṣṇu or Kali, when seen in personal isolation, are *laukikas*, that is, transitory reflections of the form-less Absolute.

It is interesting to note that, unlike other languages, Sanskrit does not use the superlative degree to describe the Supreme Being. Rather, it uses the negation of the positive degree. Thus *śrestha* (the best) is the leader of a community, not the Absolute. Latin, on the other hand, applies the super-

45. *Brihadaranyaka Upanisad*, 8,9,23

46. Heimann Betty *Faces Of Indians Thought*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1964, p. 9.

47. Heimann Betty *op. cit.* p. 129

lative of ‘good’ (*Optimus*) to Jupiter, the highest god. The superlative works on the scale of quantitative value, which vanishes in the sphere of the infinite.

Already in the late books of the *Rg Veda* Nature is sublimated and evaporated and Brahman emerges as the pure residue, a principle of universal dynamics, that is both within and outside the phenomenal world. The world of names and forms is not negated in Vedanta; only their final value is denied.

## 2. The geographical key

The West approaches the Divine through clear and distinct concepts. Hinduism is content with the search of the unknown ‘It’. It is given a thousand names (*sahasra nama*) where thousand stands for infinite number. India’s physical and climatic variety has its overtones also in its theology. Like Sanskrit grammar, the Indian landscape is also a key to Vedantic thought. India’s impenetrable jungles form a thick undergrowth of intertwined plant-system in chiaroscuro, unexplorable in their many by-paths which in an inextricable maze meet and cut each other. This conceals an unknown life-force (*élan vital*) which never reveals itself in a distinguishable single light<sup>48</sup>. This jungle-notion of the Absolute finds its expression also in Indian art and poetics. This is seen in the ‘wild tumult of rhythmic movements’ in sculpture, and in the ‘piling up of similes and metaphors’ in Sanskrit poetry. According to the *Alamkara Sastra* (poetics) a text can acquire newer meaning, by the dissolution of the *sandhi* or the phonetic connection. The Absolute is neither male nor female: it is neuter (Latin: *ne uter* = neither). The concept of ‘Ardhanariśvara’ is the exemplification of this doctrine in the *Silpa Sastra*.

## 3. The mathematical key

The concept of Zero is another key to Vedantic thought. In Mathematics the zero is the irrational number by which all natural and rational numbers are made fruitful. In Hindu theology, the zero is the productive *All and None*, the matrix of positive and negative values. *Sunya* or zero has philosophically

---

48. Heimann Betty *op. cit.* p. 89

opposing meanings, namely, the 'Void' and the 'Swollen'. Brahman, the productive Zero-point, is infinitely transcendent and also infinitely immanent. The Zero is placed between the infinite either (*akaśa*) and the infinitesimal atom (*aṇu*). This is the counter-tension of the zero-point. Zero is the no-number, says Heimann, the falling together of all numbers. Zero is the mathematical expression of the 'It' (Brahman), beyond quality and quantity<sup>49</sup>.

The goal of *Vedanta* is de-individualization of man. Says Heimann: "In India, the notion of an eternal individual soul is no more considered than the concept of an immaterial and active soul".<sup>50</sup> All the psychic and intellectual faculties of man will be-reabsorbed, "in a final de-individualizing melting process-*pralaya*".<sup>51</sup> Not only *Vedanta*, but even *Samkhya* and *Yoga* hold that the *ahamkara*, the principle of individualization, is solely an empirical fiction which hinders natural inborn true knowledge and has to be given up in the end. The individual empirical soul is always an emanation of *Prakṛti* alone. "True salvation", says Heimann, "lies in a conscious process of de-individualization".<sup>52</sup>

### Sankara's approach to the Absolute

According to Ninian Smart, Sankara had two aims to his theological work: the first was to show that, "his interpretation of revelation is the correct one and the other was to show that, "this solution is not contradicted by experience".<sup>53</sup> Thus his method is apologetic in essence and his standpoint is theological. For Sankara, knowledge at the higher level of metaphysical truth is not theoretical, but it is essentially contemplative or mystical. Sankara holds that there is only one Self, which as the inner witness, illuminates all psychophysical organisms with consciousness. By this very fact, the Self is wrongly supposed

49. Heimann Betty *op. cit.* p. 102

50. Heimann Betty *op. cit.* p. 115

51. Heimann Betty *op. cit.* p. 116

52. Heimann Betty *op. cit.* p. 117-18

53. Smart Ninian, *Doctrine And Argument In Indian Philosophy*, (London: Allen & Unwin, 1964, p. 37

to be broken up into a multiplicity of selves. For Sankara individuality pertains only to the transmigratory self. He does not speculate on the nature and origin of *maya*. Thus, from the empirical stand-point the world is neither being nor non-being. But from the higher stand-point the empirical world is a surd. The empirical existence of the cosmos can be explained due to the creative activity of the Lord. The Lord (*Isvara*) is Brahman or the Absolute as seen from the stand-point of the ordinary worshipper, immersed in ordinary experience. Says Smart: "By consequence, Sankara formulated a double-decker theory of the Holy Power: the Supreme Power is qualityless and featureless but there is a lower manifestation of it, possessing personal characteristics, etc".<sup>54</sup> Thus Sankara worked out a synthesis of Absolutism and Theism by making use of the doctrine of *maya*. Sankara was a mystic and for him Brahminical orthodoxy was only a means to attain Brahman-knowledge. Sankara was, it seemed, transcending Hinduism as it had been understood. But, according to Smart, Sankara's alleged neglect of lower-religion is very misleading. He was a zealous reformer of Hinduism, by establishing monasteries, but was also a writer of devotional hymns. Yet, he insisted that ultimately one must go beyond ritualism and devotion. Says smart: "Devotionalism and piety were the way and by treading this path one could ascend to the higher reaches of intuitive realization, in contemplative experience, of the Absolute".<sup>55</sup> Sankara did not indulge in any sterile theoretical speculation on the origin or nature of *maya-avidya*; for him the problem was how to be dissociated from it.

### Sankara's mysticism

Sankara said that he was "a seeker after perfection", which was for him the realization of the non-dual self. Commenting on the *Mundaka Upanishad* he says: "Here nothing is eternal. All activity only helps that which is perishable. But I am a seeker after perfection, which is eternal, undying, fearless, unchanging, unmoving and constant".<sup>56</sup> The goal that Sankara sought was one where there was no alteration (*vikara*), one

54. Smart Ninian, *op. cit.*, p. 100

55. Smart Ninian, *op. cit.*, p. 101

56. Sankara, Commentary on *Mundaka Upanisad*, 2; 21.

which had no beginning (*utpada*), no becoming (*sambhava*), and which was pure consciousness (*caitanyam*). Though of itself the self is *nitya-siddham*, *nitya-buddham*, and *nitya-nuktam* yet due to the superimposition of the world of multiplicity (*prapancam*) on it by *maya*, there come into existence a plurality of pseudo-selves. At the dawn of true knowledge, however, there exists only the non-dual Self. Theology and mythology lead only to false knowledge (*mithya-jñanam*) whereas true knowledge is obtained by intuition.

Sankara expresses the non-rational nature of the Brahman by such terms as, *hr̥cittvam* (majesty) *gambhiratvam* (depth). It is more than deep - *atigambhiram*. It is as difficult to plumb as the mighty ocean - *dus̄praves̄yam mahasamudravad*.<sup>57</sup>

### The way of knowledge

For Sankara the study of Brahman is the means to blessedness. *Brahmabhuvo mokṣah*, that is to be Brahman means to be saved. Brahman cannot be realized by means of Yoga. At best Yoga is a preparation for it. Sankara's mysticism like that of the Areopagite is an intellectual mysticism, as opposed to the emotional mysticism of Ramanuja (cf. Otto).<sup>58</sup> Sankara's mystical method may be epitomized by the saying: *Atmani atmanam atmāna* know the Atman in the atman alone through the *atman*. The real knowledge for Sankara is one's own vision, that is, the realization of one's identity with the Brahman. Otto says: "This awareness cannot be 'produced'; we cannot reason it out. It is not 'work'. It comes or does not come independently of our will. It must be seen".<sup>59</sup> "The way may be prepared", continues Otto, "by the words of the Vedas and by meditation on them, but in the end it must be our own vision".<sup>60</sup> Commenting on *Gita*, 11, 54 Sankara says: "By this sort of devotion it is not only possible to know Me, as declared in the *śastras*, but also to realize Me intuitively as I am and enter into Me,

57. *Mandukya Upanisad*, 4, 100

58. Otto Rudolf, *Mysticism East and West*, London: Macmillan & Co., 1932, p. 30

59. Otto Rudolf, *op. cit.* p. 33

60. Otto Rudolf, *op. cit.* p. 33

that is, to obtain liberation". Sankara adds: "When the confusing play of ideas (*cittam*) has come to rest, and he thus apprehends the highest, which is wholly spirit, essentially light, then he wins through joy".<sup>61</sup> Again Sankara declares: "The royal knowledge, the kingly secret, is here, knowledge of Brahman. And this is not Scripture knowledge but *pratyakṣagamanani*: an immediate Self-knowledge".<sup>62</sup>

### The problem of the one and the many

Both Sankara and Dionysius view the problem of the One and the many from the same angle: the One is the ground or support-*asraya* of the many. For Sankara Brahman is *jagato mulam* – the root of the world. Apart from the One, multiplicity has no reality of its own. For Sankara the world is the product of *maya*, a kind of cosmic illusion, which is neither being (*sat*) nor non-being (*asat*). Maya is *sad asadbhyam anirvacaniyam*, that is not to be defined either as being or as non-being. For if it is real, Brahman's unicity is endangered; if it is unreal, then, multiplicity remains unexplained. For Sankara, the phenomenal world, in as much as it is the appearance of Brahman, is true. But, of itself, it is unreal. Says Sankara: "*Sarvam ca namarupadi vikarajatam sad-atmana eva satyam. Svatas tu anṛtam:* (This whole multiplicity of production existing under name and form, in so far as it is Being itself, is true. Of itself, it is untrue). Advaitic mysticism consists in overcoming the phenomenal world by the attainment of true knowledge, which will reveal the illusory-nature of the world, just as a light will show the unreality of the rope-snake.

### Sankara and bhakti marga

Sankara is often described as cold intellectual theologian, with no emotional traits in his writings. This is not true. Sri Jiva Gosvami says in his *Tattva Sandarbha* that Sankara, far from opposing *Bhakti* (devotion) was an ardent promoter of it. The author of the *Bhakti-Mala* includes Sankara in the list of the great devotees of all ages. Sankara's own devotional hymns like

61. Sankara, *Gita Bhasya*, 6, 20

62. Sankara, *Gita Bhasya*, 9, 2

*Sivananda Lahari*, *Bhajagovindam* etc., are the best proof for it. According to Rudolf Otto, Advaita at least in its sub-structure, represents, "pronounced theism of a high type".<sup>63</sup> Sankara's theism is seen mainly in his commentary on the *Gita*. But, according to Otto, "Sankara rather forces the text when he attempts to read into it his own teaching of the Supra-Personal Brahman".<sup>64</sup>

In his *Sutra Bhaṣya* in about twelve loci Sankara indirectly speaks of Bhakti. Perhaps only twice he directly refers to it in the *Sutra Bhaṣya*, once using the term, *aradhana* and in the other place using the very term *bhakti*. But in his Upaniṣadic commentaries Sankara has expressed himself very clearly on the topic of *bhakti*.

S. H. Seminary  
Poonamallee  
Madras - 600056

Vikrant

---

63. Otto Rudolf, *op. cit.* p. 103  
64. Otto Rudolf, *op. cit.* p. 104

# The Experiential Content of Buddhism

About six centuries before Christ, a man called Siddhartha Gautama of the Sakya clan underwent a profound experience at a place called Bodh Gaya in Eastern India. It was such an awakening of his consciousness that ever since he was called the Buddha, the enlightened one. His experience did not remain an isolated event in the life of an individual in an unknown corner of the world. It was instead the inauguration of one of the major religions of today, namely Buddhism, and was thus a land-mark in the history of the entire world. That Buddhism has deeply influenced, and even transformed, the Far Eastern cultures is a commonplace knowledge. What is more, it has been attracting followers from western countries as well. Thus, Buddhism has played, and still plays, a crucial role in the building up of a world culture. What is important here is the fact that such an irresistible force called Buddhism was set in by the enlightenment experience of an otherwise ordinary man, Siddhartha Gautama. "...If this plan or this undertaking is of men, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God" (Acts 5: 38-39). If this argument (which persuaded the Jewish leaders to let the disciples of Christ alone) has any validity, it is time one acknowledged definitively the divine origin of the Buddha's enlightenment, and therefore, also of Buddhism. A student of religion, then, is sufficiently justified in treating the enlightenment of the Buddha as a genuine case of religious experience. However, he will immediately realize that the enlightenment experience of Buddha defies many of the western descriptions of a religious experience. Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*, for example, is certainly a classical Western description of religious experience, which, however, in my opinion, does not apply to the enlightenment experience of the Buddha. And this is precisely the thesis of the present article. I shall analyse the Buddha's experience against Otto's analysis of the religious experience.

### The idea of the holy

For Otto the religious experience is basically a creature-Creator encounter: man encounters his creator God on a personal level. Here, man, with his 'creature-consciousness' or 'creature-feeling' heightened, finds himself standing before the *ineffable* reality of God. The 'creature-feeling' is, says Otto, more than what Schleiermacher described as 'a 'feeling of dependence'. For, the latter feeling is not an 'intrinsically' religious one as it may be given also on non-religious occasions. For example, one's 'sense of personal insufficiency and impotence, a consciousness of being determined by circumstances and environment' is a feeling of dependence, which does not have anything specifically religious about it. The creature-feeling, therefore, although it is analogous to the feeling of dependence, is qualitatively different from it. This additional quality of the creature-feeling, however, is inexpressible, but can only be suggested by examples such as the experience of Abraham when he said: 'Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am but dust and ashes' (Gen. 18:27).

Further, the creature-feeling, unlike the feeling of dependence, 'has an immediate and primary reference to an object outside the self. The feeling of dependence is primarily and directly a self-consciousness, and is 'merely a category of 'self-valuation', in the sense of self-depreciation'. Therefore, in the feeling of dependence it is through an inference that one comes to refer to an object outside the self, while in the creature-feeling one refers to it primarily and immediately. Again, the object referred to in the feeling of dependence may or may not be God, while that referred to in the creature feeling is invariably God, the Creator.

The object immediately and directly involved in the creature-feeling has been named by Otto as 'the numinous'. By adopting this word coined from the Latin *numen* Otto meant to point to the unique characteristic of the object involved in the creature-feeling. His basic contention is that the *numinous* is not the same as the *holy*, this latter term being taken in the ordinary, philosophical as well as theological usage. In fact the content of the *numinous* is less than that of the *holy*. The latter

term, corresponding to the Hebrew *qādosh*, the Greek *agios* and the Latin *sacer*, has a moral as well as a rational connotation: it means 'completely good' or 'perfectly moral'. But Otto argues that the *holy*, in addition to its moral and rational significance, has something ineffable about it. It is this ineffable 'extra' in the *holy* that he calls as the *numinous*. In other words, the *numinous* is the *holy* minus its moral and rational content.

The religious experience, therefore, is the creature-feeling in the presence of the numinous. Here, neither the creature-feeling nor the numinous is within the limits of reasoning and language. They can neither be conceptualized, nor expressed in words. Consequently, the religious experience, which is the same as the creature-feeling in the presence of the numinous, too, is beyond the limits of reason and language. In short, non-rationality and ineffability are the characteristic notes of religious experience, according to Otto. It is a feeling, or rather a 'mental state perfectly *sui generis* and irreducible to any other'.

Further analysing religious experience Otto says that the *numinous* manifests itself as a Tremendous but Fascinating Mystery (*Mysterium Tremendum et Faschinans*). Being tremendous the numinous appears as aweful, overpowering and urging; being fascinating it appears as attractive; and being a mystery it appears as something wholly other. Therefore, standing before it man is frightened, feels overpowered, urged to respond, attracted towards it, but baffled. In short religious experience is a mixed feeling of fear, submission, urgency, attraction and bewilderment.

### **The enlightenment experience of Buddha**

Let us now turn to the enlightenment experience of the Buddha with a view to seeing to what extent it verifies Otto's description of religious experience, and to what extent it does not. It will be also our concern to suggest, rather implicitly, an alternative description of religious experience in the light of the enlightenment experience of the Buddha.

The story of the Buddha's enlightenment begins with an utter dissatisfaction with the present state of life. Gautama,

a youth surrounded by royal attendants and comforts, is exposed all of a sudden to the sufferings and limitations of the present existence of man: old age, sickness and death. Till then he was almost unaware of these aspects of life, and, therefore, their sudden sight was a revelation to him, which even baffled him. It was for him an encounter with the mystery of life, which was neither numinous nor fascinating, but simply terrifying. He was not encountering a wholly other being, but himself in a helpless situation. It was not particularly a creature-feeling either. It was, instead, an understanding of oneself as totally different from what one had till then thought to be. It was a revelation of himself rather than of a higher being. All the same he felt frightened, overpowered, urged to respond, challenged, and baffled if not fascinated. A Buddhist may not call it a religious experience, but it was definitely the beginning of one. It was at any rate a partial awakening of Gautama to the realities of life.

In the second stage, Gautama accepted the challenge of the mystery revealed to him, so to speak. He urgently renounced his comforts in the palace, and set out in earnest search of the truth about life. He felt called upon to unfold the mystery of life for himself and for mankind: he did not think it was beyond his comprehension. Its non-rationality and ineffability is rather relative to one's present state of intellect, which can, however, be awakened to comprehend even the deepest layers of existence, and to resolve all mysteries about it.

The third stage of the Buddha's enlightenment consisted of persistent efforts for years to unveil the mystery of life. First he sought the assistance of two teachers, and took instructions from them, which he found were not of much use for his purpose. Then he took to extreme austerities, which, too eventually proved to be of no avail. Then, giving up his fasting and self-tortures he started walking along the famous middle way, which he discovered for himself.

But about this time Gautama is said to have been severely tempted by *Māra*, the symbol of evil in Buddhism. Seeing Gautama intent on striving by the Nerāñjana river, exerting himself in contemplation to win the calm of peace, there came

*Māra* persuading him to give up his efforts, and to return to the comforts of the present life. The temptation to give up his endeavours was not, however, a sudden, isolated, moment in his enlightenment experience. Nor should *Māra* be understood as an evil, personal, spirit. *Māra* and his temptations together stand for man's almost inborn attachment to the comforts of the present life. Man is torn between what he surely has at present, and what seems to him the future has in store for him. Such an inner conflict was part of Gautama's experience from the moment he decided to give up the comfortable existence in the palace. It cannot possibly have been easy for him to leave his young wife and the new born son, his parents, and other persons and things that were surely *his*. He was wagering the present, that was definitely his, for the uncertain future. His sense of anxiety and uncertainty must have been at the acutest when he found all the traditional means of realization insufficient. The temptation by *Māra* then meant a crucial moment of decision as to whether he must carry on with his striving after the still uncertain enlightenment, or to return to the easy life at home that was still in his possession. He decided for the former, and it was indeed an irrevocable victory for him over himself. It was, further an important step forward towards the fulness of enlightenment, and to that extent it was a numinous experience, too. 'Then *Māra* said to himself: for seven years have I followed the Lord step by step; I can find no entrance to the All-enlightened, the watchful one..... The lute of *Māra*, who was overcome with grief, dropped from beneath his arms. Then in dejection he disappeared from there.'

Now that his passion for the pleasures of this life are burnt away, Gautama is let alone to pursue his middle way, which was for the most part a way of yogic meditation. The insistence was more on the control of the senses and mind, than on physical tortures. It progressed in four successive trances during which the feelings of joy and pleasure, and the operation of reason and mind, steadily decreased, while the concentration of mind, the sense of indifference to pain and pleasure, the inner serenity, mindfulness, and consciousness steadily increased. The fourth trance was 'without pain and pleasure, and with purity

of mindfulness and equanimity'. It was in this fourth trance that the historic enlightenment of Gautama occurred.

The enlightenment experience took place, thus, not in an atmosphere of awe and riddle, but in one of calm and serenity. Nor was it an abrupt break-through of the Infinite into the finite realm. On the contrary it was a gradual unfolding of the infinite dimensions of existence, including one's own existence. In the first watch of the night Gautama remembered the series of his past births one after another. In the second watch his yogic eye was open with which he saw, as if in a spotless mirror, the inner secrets of the universe: he saw that one's present life was determined by one's past *karma*. In the third watch he saw more deeply into the mechanism of the universe and the causation of suffering, and passed through the eight successive stages of meditation. This was the fullness of enlightenment at which Gautama, now the Buddha, declared: "This is the genuine Way along which the great sages of the past walked on to the ultimate truth. I have got it now".

### **The idea of the holy versus enlightenment**

Obviously there is little comparision between Otto's idea of the holy and the Buddha's enlightenment experience. The basic disagreement between them is that while the former is a creature-Creator encounter on a personal level, the latter is a gradual unveiling of oneself. However, there are certain feelings that are, at least superficially, common to both experiences. First of all, in both cases there is a feeling of helplessness: in the experience of the holy it takes the form of a creature-feeling, while in the enlightenment experience it takes the form of a feeling of helplessness in the face of the realization that life is all suffering. Secondly, the feeling of fear is common to both experiences: in one it is the awe for a wholly other being, while in the other it is the fear that one may not ever get out of the conditions of suffering. Thirdly, in both cases there is a sense of mystery: in one it is the sense of the mystery of the Being one encounters, in the other it is the sense of the mystery of oneself. Thus the feelings of helplessness, fear and mystery are somehow common to both experiences.

Even so, in the actual experience of those common points there is an important difference as well. That is, as the experience becomes deeper and deeper, in one case the feelings in question become more and more intense, while in the other they become less and less intense. For example, as one advances in the experience of the holy, the feelings of creatureliness, awe and otherness increase, while as one becomes more and more enlightened, the feelings of helplessness in the face of suffering, anxiety for the future, and of the mysteriousness of oneself decrease. As Otto seems to suggest one standing closest to the Numinous will feel most awful, although here the element of fascination is not ignored. But one, having attained the fullness of the enlightenment, experiences immense peace and quiet.

Again, Otto's description suggests that the closest one approaches the Holy, the more incomprehensible, the more non-rational and the more ineffable it would appear. But the accounts of the Buddha's experience suggest that as one approaches closer and closer to enlightenment, more and more comprehensible and rational would reality appear. It may be true that the enlightenment experience is ineffable, but ineffability does not always imply incomprehensibility.

The resurrection experience of Christ seems to have more correspondence with the enlightenment, than the experience of the holy as described by Otto. Christ's experience was a total transformation of personality rather than an encounter with the numinous. His was rather an awakening of his consciousness of himself as the son of God, just as the enlightenment of Gautama was rather an awakening of his consciousness of his own infinite dimensions.

But descriptions of Christ's experience substantially differ from those of the Buddha's experience. One is described in terms of the redemption of the body from death and corruption, while the other is described in terms of a deeper vision into, and consciousness of, the inner mechanism of the universe. This difference of descriptions may be accounted for by the difference of the cultural contexts of the two experiences. The experience of the Christ takes place in the Jewish culture, and the experience of the Buddha in the Hindu culture. Both the Christ

as well as the Buddha broke with the respective culture to some extent. Neither of them, however was really able to transcend the given culture, and to be the subject of a culture-free experience. Consequently, Christ's experience receives descriptions in terms and concepts proper to the Jewish cultural context; terms and concepts such as "sin", "redemption", "transformation", "immortality", and "resurrection". The Buddha's experience, on the contrary, receives descriptions in terms and concepts proper to the Hindu cultural context: terms and concepts such as "karma", "transmigration", "cause of suffering", and "enlightenment of consciousness".

The difference between the historical experiences of Christ and the Buddha reveals the failure of Otto's approach to religious experience, namely, that he tried to speak about religious experience as such, without any reference to the particular cultural contexts of the individuals concerned. He *a priori* constructed a frame of religious experience in which he thought to fit the religious experiences of all individuals, irrespective of their cultural context. That such an approach is bound to fail when it comes to actual experience of individuals, is sufficiently proved by examples of Christ's resurrection and the Buddha's enlightenment.

Dharmaram College,  
Bangalore - 560029

Thomas Kochumuttam